

Shakespeare and the Covid-19 vaccine in the British and European news:

An analysis of partially filled constructions (PFCs) and snowclones

Fabio Ciambella

Sapienza University of Rome
(fabio.ciambella@uniroma1.it)

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of a restricted corpus of British, Italian, and other European news from different media (e.g., newspaper articles, blogs, social media, etc.) about William Shakespeare – an 81-year-old man from Warwickshire with the same name of the well-known Elizabethan playwright – and the Covid-19 vaccine. Mr. Shakespeare was the first man, second only to a 90-year-old Northern Irish woman named Margaret Keenan, to receive a dose of the vaccine in the United Kingdom on 8 December 2020 (he died on 25 May 2021 for reasons unrelated to the vaccine), and both British and Continental communication media did not miss the opportunity to capitalise on this piece of news as an advertising gimmick. Nevertheless, news about Mr. Shakespeare's vaccination offers incredibly fertile ground for a linguistic analysis of puns and wordplay mainly about the titles of and famous quotes from the Bard's plays, such as "The Gentleman of Corona" and "The Taming of the Flu." Also resorting to the Coronavirus corpus, released in May 2020 on english-corpora.org (<https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/>), this paper argues that such puns and wordplay have a common structure, known in linguistic terms as partially filled constructions (PFCs). A particular kind of PFC, known as snowclones, is introduced and discussed, with special emphasis on the productivity of *Hamlet's* "To be or not to be," understood as a PFC, with the purpose of demonstrating its high productivity.

1. Introduction: Enter Mr. Shakespeare pursued by a syringe

The UK was one of the first countries worldwide and the first in Europe to start a Covid-19 vaccine campaign. As early as 8 December 2020 (known as V-day), the MHRA (Medicine and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) authorised the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (i.e., Comirnaty), and the vaccine campaign officially began in the British Isles. Ninety-one-year-old Margaret Keenan from Northern Ireland was the first to receive the first dose of Comirnaty at University Hospital Coventry, immediately followed by an eighty-one-year-old man from

Warwickshire whose name was, believe it or not, William Shakespeare (who died on 25 May 2021 for reasons unrelated to the side effects of the vaccination). Mr. Shakespeare's wife, Joy, when interviewed by the BBC on the day of her husband's death about Bill's reaction to the media coverage that followed his vaccination, declared that

Bill was so grateful for being offered the opportunity to become one of the first people in the world to be given the vaccine. It was something he was hugely proud of – he loved seeing the media coverage and the positive difference he was able to make to the lives of so many. He often talked to people about it and would always encourage everyone to get their vaccine whenever he could. (*BBC News* 2021: online)

Beginning on 8 December 2020, from tabloids to social media, from radio programmes to TV shows, this news item spread around the world and stimulated the creativity and humour of journalists, presenters, and social media users alike who immediately began to adapt the titles and catchphrases of the renown Bard of Avon, to whom the first vaccinated British man was homonymous.

We do not know if "Bill" Shakespeare's vaccination was an intentional publicity stunt or happened by chance. Some journalists, reporters, and media users from outside the UK deemed his vaccination a clever marketing strategy, so much so that some Italian reporters and media users ironically asked their government to find a Dante Alighieri or a Giovanni Boccaccio to be vaccinated on the Italian V-day¹.

Rather than answer the above-mentioned question, this article examines some British, Italian, and European news items from various media (newspaper articles, blogs, social media, etc.) from a linguistic perspective, thus treating quotations from Shakespeare's canon as peculiar syntactic and lexical structures known as Partially Filled Constructions (hereafter PFCs) and snowclones.

2. Partially Filled Constructions (PFCs) and snowclones

First introduced² by Adele E. Goldberg (2006) in her Constructionist theory as Partially Lexically-filled Constructions, thus considering them part of lexical studies, PFCs have been recently investigated in recurring to a continuum-based theory whose extremes are syntax, on the one hand, and lexis, on the other (Simone 2007; 2017; Piunno 2016; 2020). As defined by Valentina Piunno (2020: 145), "Partially Filled Constructions are characterized by the presence of a variable pattern, i.e., a pattern subject to partial lexical variation. In particular, these sequences are composed of a fixed and immutable part and of a part subject to variation." The part subject to variation comprises empty lexical and syntactic slots, blank positions that can be filled according to certain morphosyntactic and lexical predictable rules:

Blank positions can vary in number and type, depending on the structure. Even if they are flexible (or variable), from the lexical point of view they maintain a certain regularity: in fact, they admit saturation with material of the same morphosyntactic or semantic nature.

¹ See, among others, the Twitter post by Deltacetum, 8 December 2020, https://twitter.com/Deltacetum?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1336313691189415938%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ilmattino.it%2Fprimopiano%2Fesoteri%2Fwilliam_shakespeare_vaccino_covid_ultime_notizie_oggi_8_dicembre_2020-5633029.html (08/2021) or Gaiaitalia 2020. See also Sky tg24 (2020) where the journalist declares that Mr. Shakespeare was "sicuramente scelto non a caso per essere in prima fila" (Eng. tr.: "certainly not chosen by chance to be in the front row"). Translations from other European languages are all mine, unless acknowledged otherwise.

² Although the label "partially lexically-filled constructions" was formally introduced by Goldberg, PFCs had already been investigated by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988), who had called them "let alone" constructions.

Semantically, they can have predictable meaning (even when idiomatic) which derives from the entire construction. Finally, on the basis of the various exemplars that can be derived from them, PFCs show different levels of productivity. (Piunno 2020: 146)

An example of a PFC from Shakespeare's plays is *Hamlet's* well-known hemistich "to be or not to be" (3.1.57)³. As I discuss elsewhere (Ciambella, forthcoming), and as will be seen later in this article, this PFC can be considered one of the most productive in the entire Shakespearean canon, with dozens of examples from advertisements, book titles, article headings, etc. The scheme of this PFC can be represented as follows:

To X_{VERB} or not to X_{VERB}

where the verbalizers "to", the conjunction "or", and the adverb "not" represent the fixed slots of this PFC and the two Xs the slots to be filled with material that, given the high level of morphological predictability that the hemistich has, belongs to, or ends up in the word class of verbs. An example from advertising campaigns is "To dip or not to dip," the slogan used by the American fast food chain Chick-Fil-A to advertise their new honey BBQ sauce in 2019.

One kind of PFC is the snowclone (or snow clone)⁴. Theorised and studied in the syntactic model called Construction Grammar (CxG)⁵, a snowclone is "a phrasal template (an expression with one or more open slots and some fixed lexical material) derived from a quote that has gained the status of a funny or clever tagline" (Michaelis 2017: online). Laura A. Michaelis's definition of snowclones is well suited to this study, since all the PFCs analysed herein can be considered snowclones deriving from Shakespearean quotations. To my knowledge, in the field of CxG, snowclones have been investigated almost exclusively from a morphosyntactic, phraseological, and cognitivist point of view (see, among others, Sag, 2010; Kay and Michaelis, 2012; Traugott, 2014), without much attention to translation/adaptation aspects, i.e., to the relationship between what I would call "source (phrasal) template" (borrowing from Michaelis's definition) and "target clone," in order to adapt two methodological frameworks (CxG and translation studies) to the case studies analysed below.

The case studies introduced in the next session are taken from a variety of news items and will be analysed in morphosyntactic, lexical, and translational terms.

3. Case studies

"Shakespeare gets Covid vaccine: All's well that ends well". This is the title of the first article that the BBC devoted to the vaccination of Mr. Shakespeare from Warwickshire on 8 December 2020. Here no PFC is present, but this title is worth exploring from a pragmatic viewpoint, especially in terms of information structure. In fact, two extended foci are presented in the form of two assertives, the first affirming that a certain Shakespeare was vaccinated and the second declaring that the eighty-one-year-old patient is okay. Both foci present interesting semantic elements. The first assertive rotates around the homonymity between the Bard and the second vaccinated individual in the UK, thus grabbing the attention of British readers who clearly associate the

³ In this article, all quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The New Oxford Shakespeare* edition. See references for bibliographical details.

⁴ Moving from the premise that in this article I consider snowclones particular types of PFCs, the two terms are used almost interchangeably here.

⁵ As defined by Michaelis, in CxG "rules of syntactic combination (descriptions of local trees) are directly associated with interpretive and use conditions, by means of semantic and pragmatic features that attach to the mother or daughter nodes in these descriptions" (Michaelis n.d.: online).

headline to Shakespeare the playwright. In terms of pragmatics, the inference that readers can draw from this focus is strictly dependent on their background knowledge. Such knowledge can be understood as the sum of situational knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of the situational context of a sentence, and world knowledge, i.e., general knowledge due to past experiences. In this case, situational and world knowledge can conflict, or, more precisely, world knowledge can mislead the reader's inference that the Shakespeare in question is the famous playwright if not supported by situational knowledge; that is, readers should be aware that Mr. Shakespeare is an eighty-one-year-old man from Warwickshire living in the twenty-first century. I would argue that this tension between situational and world knowledge is absolutely intended and that it tempts the reader to go on reading the article.

The second focus coincides with the quotation of the title of a Shakespeare play, which is interesting from various perspectives. First of all, it reinforces the connection between the two foci. At the same time, this second sentence highlights the apparent anachronistic absurdity and ambiguity of the first one and contributes to the readers' confusion and curiosity⁶. Nevertheless, one cannot assume out of hand that a native English readership is aware that the second focus is in fact a Shakespeare title, since *All's Well That Ends Well* is not one of the Bard's best known plays. In fact a middlebrow English reader of BBC news might not understand it as a quotation, but simply as an idiom or proverb (which, however, became popular thanks to Shakespeare's play).

It is by reading the article that interesting PFCs emerge. The first snowclone can be found in the following question: "So, if Ms Keenan was patient 1A, was Mr. Shakespeare 'Patient 2B or not 2B'?"⁷. As for phonological aspects, the target clone "2B or not 2B," if taking into account allophonic variations, connected speech, and the alternation of weak and strong forms, sounds quite similar to the original hemistich, thus understanding the abbreviated form 2B as the quasi-homophone of "to be." Both morphologically and semantically, on the other hand, this PFC offers a great deal to think about. In terms of morphology, the full infinitive form "to be" is substituted by its homophone adjectival form "2B," which however requires a noun to which it refers (that is the reason why "Patient" precedes the PFC). However, the meaning of the source phrasal template is completely undermined, since the verb "to be" becomes the numeral 2B, thus indicating that Mr. Shakespeare was the second person to be vaccinated against Covid-19 in Britain, after patient 1A, Margaret Keenan. Of course this pun/wordplay about the PFC "to be or not to be" contributes to the humoristic tone of the entire article at a time when humour, given the gravity of the epidemic, was not that widespread in news reports. The humour in this article clearly mirrors the hopeful message expressed by the BBC journalist regarding the beginning of the UK's vaccine campaign.

The BBC article even reports on the other snowclones populating social media that day, Twitter in first place. "Two doses, both alike in quantity" is built on the (to many, well-known) first line of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* in Q2⁸. In this case, the PFC seems to follow a certain regularity. Considering the prototypical construction "Two X, both alike in Y," with "X" as being

⁶ Ambiguity in news headlines has been studied extensively using numerous methodological frameworks, from semantics (Nwala and Umukoro 2017) to psycholinguistics (Khalifa 2018) and Digital Humanities (Liu, Wei and Wan 2018).

⁷ The same wordplay can be found, i.a., in an online article by Reuters (2020): "Some asked if Margaret Keenan was patient 1A, then was Shakespeare 'Patient 2B or not 2B'?" in the American newsletter *The Insider* (Bostock, 2020): "Another popular joke pondered that if Keenan, the first to get the jab, was patient 1A, then did that make Shakespeare 'Patient 2B or not 2B'?" and in many other newspapers worldwide on 8 December 2020, such as *The Tribune* (2020) and the *Mumbai Mirror* (2020). Actually, the wordplay is a quote from a tweet by the Twitter account VoiceOfTheMysterons who was the first to report the news on Twitter on 8 December 2020, https://twitter.com/Mysteron_Voice/status/1336214188998471680 (08/2021).

⁸ For details about the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*, see, among others, Roberts 1998: 7; Erne 2007; Bigliuzzi 2020: 21.

the disyllabic plural noun “households” and “Y” the trisyllable “dignity” in the Q2 version of the Prologue, the tweet reported by the BBC respects both the syllabification and morphological pattern of the original PFC, thus replacing “X” with the disyllabic plural noun “doses” and “Y” with the trisyllable “quantity.” This point is very interesting, since it shows that constructions may respond not only to morphosyntactic (PoS tag) or semantic restrictions, but other kinds of constraint are also possible.

Other tweets show a similar successful productivity of some Shakespearean catchphrases and titles. For instance, Shakespeare’s source template *The Taming of the Shrew* becomes the target clone “the taming of the flu,” operating a substitution of the noun “shrew” with the noun “flu,” which, in addition to the evident semantic adequacy of the situation described, rhymes with the Shakespearean term. A similar mechanism is evident in the adaption of another Shakespearean title, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which became “the gentleman of Corona” in some tweets. Here the noun phrase “the two gentlemen” is not altered semantically, but only morphologically, from plural to singular, while the prepositional phrase “of Verona” becomes “of Corona,” the proper name of the Northern Italian city being transformed into the proper name of the virus which rhymes with it. One last example of this case is “the merchant of virus”: once more, the last element of the snowclone is subject to substitution, this time from the proper name of another Northern Italian city, i.e., Venice, to the common noun “virus.” The above examples illustrate that, despite other variations, the most common PFCs from the Shakespearean canon tend to move their empty slot(s) to the right, on the last content word. This productivity, I would argue, might be justified in terms of suprasegmental phonology, given that in affirmative statements the last lexical word usually coincides with the sentence stress.

Nevertheless, adaptations of Shakespeare’s PFCs proved to be productive not only for phonological reasons or in modifying the last element of a quotation from the Bard’s canon. A Twitter user, paraphrasing Mercutio’s last curse on Romeo’s and Juliet’s families (the source phrasal template “A plague on both your houses,” 3.1.59), shared the news of Mr. Shakespeare’s vaccination by adding the caption “A plague on neither of your houses,” this target clone focussing on the distributive determiners instead of on the last content word and establishing a parallelism between contagion by plague in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and by Coronavirus today. Thus s/he nullifies the proleptic curse that the Shakespearean character throws on both Montagues and Capulets, reversing the expressive sentence into an assertive one. Journalist Dan Walker, always on Twitter, simply considered the determiner “the” in *The Winter’s Tale* as an empty slot in Shakespeare’s title and substituted it with the deictic “this.” The caption “This Winter’s Tale” clearly contextualises Shakespeare’s “sad tale [...] best for winter,” as Mamillius says in 2.1.25, within the precise chronological framework of the 2020–21 winter, when the vaccine campaign against Covid-19 began.

4. A few examples of Shakespeare’s snowclones in Italy and the rest of Europe: A European translation legacy?⁹

To what effect is Shakespeare’s work invoked in relation with the tensions inherent in European societies? Can we know whether such invocations aim to encourage reflections on Europe as a social, political and/ or cultural entity? Is it possible to conceptualize

⁹ The question of a European and global Shakespeare, decentralised from his Anglophone original chronotope, is a much debated contemporary one. Suffice it to think of such editorial series as ‘Shakespeare in European Culture’ (edited by Dirk Delabastita and Keith Gregor for John Benjamins) or ‘Global Shakespeare Inverted’ (edited by Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, David Schalkwyk, and Silvia Bigliuzzi for Bloomsbury), devoted entirely to Shakespearean reception in Europe and the world, respectively.

Shakespearean drama as offering an effective instrument that connects – or not – the voices of the people of Europe? (Fayard 2019: 10)

Fayard's questions help us introduce the second part of my analysis, which deals with Shakespearean snowclones in Continental Europe – Italy in particular – concerning “Bill” Shakespeare's vaccination. This analysis is aimed at demonstrating that both from a linguistic and cultural point of view, Shakespeare's heritage is not simply rooted in English culture, but his legacy is a European one whose long-standing tradition of translations and adaptations contributes, even in this case, to successfully conveying specific meanings in non-anglophone countries, in the optics that “everyone understands Shakespeare” (Yong 2005: 527).

The Italian media were not indifferent to William Shakespeare's vaccination. What is interesting for the purposes of this article is the translational approach adopted in relation to PFCs. Italian journalists and media users seem to distance themselves from the snowclones created by their English colleagues – perhaps also out of respect for mother tongues that were believed “authorized” to quote from their national Bard – and simply translated some PFCs into Italian, sometimes acknowledging the source, sometimes resorting to available Italian translations and ignoring the English source template. For instance, journalist Camilla Lombardi, in her article entitled “Il primo uomo vaccinato nel Regno Unito si chiama William Shakespeare” (“The first vaccinated man in the UK is called William Shakespeare”), dated 9 December 2020 and published in the online magazine *wired.it*, acknowledges Twitter as her source:

Com'è ovvio le battute sul caso del signor Shakespeare si sprecano in tutto il mondo (e ci mancherebbe altro). Soprattutto su Twitter si leggono ipotetici stralci dell' *Amleto* dagli echi pandemici come “*Vaccinare o non vaccinare: questo è il problema*”, oppure rititolazioni di celebri commedie quali *L'influenza domata* (al posto de *La Bisbetica domata*) o *Iniezione di una notte di mezza estate* (o per meglio dire di metà inverno, in questo caso). (Lombardi 2020: online)¹⁰

The phrase “[e]specially on Twitter” underlines that the author is self-distancing from what follows, i.e., a series of snowclones she found on Twitter (whose screenshot she attaches below the text) and that she translates from English, resorting to the best-known Italian versions of some Shakespearean catchphrases¹¹. The same distancing narrative strategy can be found in other articles at the time. For example, Ida Artiaco reports that ““*Vaccinare o non vaccinare: questo è il problema*”, si legge in un tweet che fa eco direttamente all' *Amleto*, oppure “*Tutto è bene quel che finisce (non ancora) bene*”, con riferimento al titolo dell'omonima commedia scritta tra il 1602 e il 1603” (Artiaco 2020: online)¹². Even newspapers from Italian Switzerland adopted the same strategies, as one can read in *La Regione*, the most widespread newspaper in the Canton of Ticino:

Il signor Shakespeare ha scatenato gli utenti di Twitter prodottisi in giochi di parole come “*The taming of the flu*” (titolo originale de “*La bisbetica domata*”, dove “*flu*” è

¹⁰ Eng. tr.: “Obviously, jokes about Mr. Shakespeare's case spread all over the world (it couldn't be otherwise). Especially on Twitter, one can read alleged excerpts from *Hamlet* with pandemic echoes such as “To vaccinate or not to vaccinate: that is the question”, or retitling famous comedies such as *The Taming of the Flu* (instead of *The Taming of the Shrew*) or *A Midsummer Night's Injection* (or rather mid-winter, in this case).”

¹¹ As an informative article addressed to general readers, the text could not use more refined Italian translations, also because one cannot take for granted that the author herself knows other Italian versions which are not part of the Italian cultural heritage. For instance, Montale's translation of Hamlet's catchphrase with “Essere... o non essere. È il problema” (Mondadori) or Lombardo's version “Essere o non essere – questa è la domanda” (Feltrinelli) are generally known by scholars familiar with the topic.

¹² Eng. tr.: ““To vaccinate or not to vaccinate: that is the question”, reads a tweet that echoes *Hamlet* directly, or ‘All's well that ends (not yet) well’, referring to the title of the homonymous comedy written between 1602 and 1603.”

influenza) oppure “The Two Gentlemen of Corona” (già “Verona”). Qualcuno si chiede che se Margaret Keenan, la prima vaccinata in Inghilterra, è paziente A1, allora Shakespeare sia “paziente 2B or not 2B”. (*La Regione* 2020: online)¹³

In the above examples, distancing narrative strategies help the authors acknowledge that they are reporting someone else’s words. Yet, the first two examples¹⁴, by reporting PFCs directly in translation for the Italian general reader, without expressly acknowledging whether the source phrasal template is in English, journalists give the impression that an Italian Twitter user could have written those target clones and that translations were actually by those users instead of their own. By generally acknowledging that some Twitter users started creating fun snowclones, without specifying their nationality or native language, the journalists are hypothetically recognising that “everyone understands Shakespeare”, that he is universal in whatever language his best-known titles and catchphrases are quoted and/or manipulated, as in the case of the PFCs cited above.

In order to confirm this hypothesis, snowclones whose source phrasal template is Hamlet’s well-known catchphrase “To be or not be”¹⁵ are reported in the table below, which contains PFCs from other European languages (in alphabetical order) referring to Mr. Shakespeare’s vaccination:

Target clone ¹⁶	English translation
Dutch	
Vaccineren of niet vaccineren? Dat is de vraag ¹⁷	To be vaccinated or not to be vaccinated? That is the question
French	
Se vacciner ou ne pas se vacciner? Telle est la question ¹⁸	To get vaccinated or not to get vaccinated? That is the question
German	
Impfen oder nicht Impfen – das ist hier die Frage ¹⁹	To vaccinate or not to vaccinate – That is the question
Polish	

¹³ Eng. tr.: “Mr. Shakespeare has unleashed Twitter users who have produced puns such as *The Taming of the Flu* (original title: *The Taming of the Shrew*, where ‘flu’ stands for *influenza*) or *The Two Gentlemen of Corona* (original: *Verona*). Some wonder that if Margaret Keenan, the first vaccinated person in England, is patient A1, then Shakespeare is ‘patient 2B or not 2B’.”

¹⁴ The third journalist seems to prefer avoiding Italian translations, assuming perhaps that the inhabitants of Ticino understand English or are somehow familiar with it.

¹⁵ This catchphrase was chosen as a case study because it has been adopted as a source template for snowclones related to Shakespeare’s vaccination in all major European languages. While not all European languages have been selected, those considered as samples, belonging from different families (mainly German, Romance, and Slavic languages), all show the same PCF translational pattern.

¹⁶ As examples of snowclones from the web reported in a table, no bibliographical reference is provided in the specific section, but rather in the footnotes below.

¹⁷ Scheper, S., “Hoe een kwetsbare oudere een selfie maakt tijdens het vaccineren in Oldenzaal. En heimwee naar die oude plakzuilen in De Lutte”, *AD*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.ad.nl/oldenzaal/ho-een-kwetsbare-oudere-een-selfie-maakt-tijdens-het-vaccineren-in-oldenzaal-en-heimwee-naar-die-oude-plakzuilen-in-de-lutte-a3fe1743/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (08/2021).

¹⁸ Tweet by Wiesel, T., 8 December 2020, <https://mobile.twitter.com/wiesel/status/1336297240621625344> (08/2021).

¹⁹ Podcast by prof. Lenzen, D., “Impfen oder nicht Impfen – das ist hier die Frage”, University of Hamburg, 8 December 2020, <https://www.uni-hamburg.de/newsroom/podcast/wie-jetzt-13.html> (08/2021).

Przyjąć szczepionkę Pfizera albo nie przyjąć ²⁰	To take the Pfizer vaccine or not to take
Portuguese	
Ser ou não ser (vacinado), eis a questão ²¹	To be or not to be (vaccinated), That is the question
Romanian	
A fi sau a nu fi... vaccinat, aceasta-i întrebarea! ²²	To be or not to be... vaccinated, That is the question!
Russian	
Быть или не быть вакцинированным ²³ (Byt' ili ne byt' vaktsinirovannym)	To be or not to be vaccinated
Spanish	
Ponérmela o no ponérmela, esa es la cuestión ²⁴	To take it or not to take it, That is the question

Table 1 – Examples of some target clones from European languages (source template: “To be or not to be”).

Although space limitations preclude highlighting issues of linguistic typology, the examples reported in the above table, all taken from various media, illustrate the astonishing productivity of the Shakespearean PFC “To be or not to be” in the European languages examined²⁵. As noted earlier, what must be noticed from a structural point of view is the fact that, on the one hand, some snowclones show that the infinitive “to be” is the empty slot to be filled with material of the same grammatical class, yet is semantically different (i.e., Dutch, French, German, Polish, and Spanish), while, on the other hand, examples from other languages – i.e., Portuguese, Romanian, and Russian – are literal translations from the original catchphrase and add the past participle “vaccinated” (respectively “vacinado,” “vaccinat” and “vaktsinirovannym”) that transforms the predicative “be” into an auxiliary to create passive forms or a copula. Both mechanisms, however, highlight the impressive productivity of this Shakespearean catchphrase, one that can be easily and successfully adapted in basically any European language to convey the same message: the vaccination campaign began on 8 December in the UK, the first European country to do so, and it is now the right time to decide whether to be vaccinated or not.

Lastly, two interesting cases to be considered are the Polish and Spanish ones. The Polish snowclone, found in the majority of the Polish media consulted, shows formal irregularity and disequilibrium consisting in avoiding the repetition of the NP+PP (“szczepionkę Pfizera,” Eng. tr.: “Pfizer’s vaccine”). Thus, the PFC’s two empty slots are not filled with the same lexical items, perhaps because the object(s) of the verb “przyjąć” are implied for reasons of readability in the second slot. The Spanish Twitter user, meanwhile, opted for a similar strategy of object

²⁰ MK and KF, “Szok na Wyspach. Shakespeare drugą osobą zaszczepioną w kraju”, *TVP Info*, 8 December 2020, <https://www.tvp.info/51230836/koronawirus-william-shakespeare-81-lat-druga-osoba-na-swiecie-zaszczepiona-preparatem-pfizera-szok-w-wielkiej-brytanii> (08/2021).

²¹ Blog post by Ernani, F., 8 December 2020, <https://www.tenhomaisdiscosqueamigos.com/2020/12/09/william-shakespeare-vacina-covid-19/> (08/2021).

²² Blog post by ProLider, 8 December 2020, <https://www.prolider.ro/2021/01/08/a-fi-sau-a-nu-fi-vaccinat/> (08/2021).

²³ RIA (Russian Information Agency) Novisti, “Вторым британцем, привитым от COVID-19, стал 80-летний Уильям Шекспир” (“Vtorym britancem, privitym ot COVID-19, stal 80-letnij Uil’jam Shekspir”), 8 December 2020, <https://ria.ru/20201208/vaktsinatsiya-1588221769.html> (08/2021).

²⁴ Tweet by Er Primo Pedro, 8 December 2020, <https://twitter.com/ErPrimoPedro/status/1336295702239080454> (08/2021).

²⁵ The table also shows that the second part of *Hamlet*’s line, i.e., the second hemistich “that is the question”, cannot be considered a PFC, since no translation seems to change it with lexical items belonging to other semantic fields and/or. Quotations from Polish and Russian media also show that the second hemistich is not necessary to the aim of the message conveyed.

implication, this time substituting the verb “vacunarse” (Eng. tr.: “to get vaccinated”) with its semantically equivalent light verb construction “ponerse la vacuna” (Eng. tr.: “to take the vaccine”) and substituting the direct object with the third person singular clitic “-la”. This way the Spanish Twitter user is pragmatically resorting to situational knowledge, both shared by him and his followers, assuming that everybody understands the context in which the snowclone is inserted.

5. Conclusion

By analysing a restricted corpus of news from British and European (mainly Italian) newspapers and social media, this article has tried to demonstrate that, from a linguistic point of view, one of the most successful and productive structures adopted to convey information about the anti-Covid vaccination of William Shakespeare from Warwickshire on 8 December 2020 were the so-called Partially Filled Constructions, in particular the subcategory of snowclones. Most of the PFCs and snowclones explored are taken from the Bard’s canon and readapt his titles and most famous catchphrases – as in the case of *Hamlet*’s “To be or not to be” – in order to catch the reader’s attention through humour while at the same time establishing a connection between the 81-year-old vaccinated man and the early modern English playwright. Although a broader and more varied corpus – in terms of textual genres and quantitative data – is needed, all the examples examined above illustrate the high level of morphosyntactic and lexicosemantic productivity of certain Shakespearean catchphrases and titles if considered as PFCs.

Ultimately, although more significant quantitative studies are needed, the analysis conducted on examples from languages other than English may demonstrate the existence of a Shakespearean European legacy, which, mainly resorting to consolidated translation practices of Shakespeare’s canon (see, among others, Cetera-Włodarczyk *et al.* 2019), contributes to the high level of productivity and adaptability of some Shakespearean catchphrases in other Continental languages, thus creating the image of a pan-European, de-anglicised Bard, also – or, better yet, above all – in pandemic times.

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