Language
on the Move

RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US

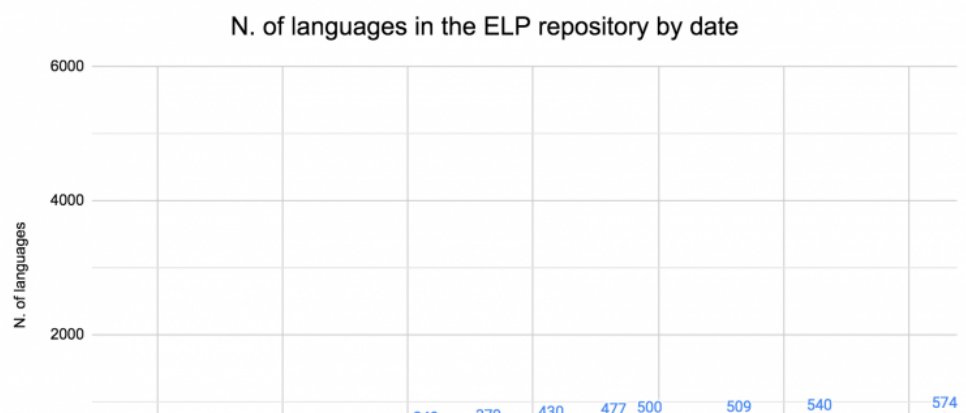# Message- vs. community models in risk communication

3 Comments   2,970 views

By Pierpaolo di Carlo | August 6, 2020 | Covid-19

Editor's note: The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a renewed focus on linguistic diversity and the way it intersects with social inclusion. In this latest contribution to our series of language aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, Pierpaolo di Carlo provides an overview of the virALLanguages project experience. The call for contributions to the series continues to be open.

***

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated an unprecedented amount of translation work in both major and minority languages of the world. The online repository of the Endangered Languages Project (ELP)—which houses links to most of the material about COVID-19 that are available online in "Indigenous, Endangered, and Under-Resourced Languages"—currently contains around 1,500 resources

N. of languages in the ELP repository by date

Number of languages present in the ELP repository (March – June 2020) against the background of the world's ca. 6,000 languages

considered under-resourced or otherwise marginalized.

appear on the surface, as I will try to outline in this post.

Understanding a message means accepting it? A key but forgotten issue

Let's start by saying that, from a quantitative point of view, there still remains much to do: if we consider that there are more than 6,000 languages currently spoken in the world, resources are still lacking for more than 90% of them.

But, one could argue: does this matter? Reaching every person on earth is not contingent upon having resources in all the world's languages because most people on earth are multilingual, right? And here comes the key point: Can we consider translation work as a purely mechanistic endeavor so that, by making a verbatim translation of a resource from language A to language B, we will be assured that those who understand language B will respond to the message as expected? If people understand a message, will that automatically mean that they accept it?

Learning from the past

Previous experience during the various Ebola outbreaks (2014-2019) in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has shown that without a clear understanding of the specific cultural situation where communication about risk takes place, translation efforts may be in vain, if not counterproductive. In reporting research done by Translators Without Borders in DRC, Kemp (2020) informs us that "study participants voiced frustration with information like 'You have to go early to the Ebola treatment centre to be cured.' [study participants] want details on complex issues to inform their decisions, and they want them presented in what they referred to as 'community language'—meaning in a language and style they understand, using words and concepts they are familiar with."

Some further suggestions are provided by Bastide (2018), who worked in West Africa: "one cannot understand the [Ebola] outbreak in West Africa without clarifying its relation to colonial and postcolonial medical practice across the region; in the same spirit, it is difficult to understand the crisis

The "do the 5" poster in Torwali, a minority language spoken in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan

understand vernacular rationalizations of the event, involving culturally and socially formed expectations; and it is difficult as well to make sense of the situation without looking at how the event reshuffles social arrangements … as when Ebola intersected with political elections, or with social relations by restricting body contacts or disturbing funeral rituals."

Put differently, having a message that complies with the grammar and the lexicon of a given language is just the start of a translation work. The primary goal of risk communication is that people change their behaviors based on the new information they receive. So, the point is *not* that the message merely be understood, but that it be understood *and accepted* by as many people as possible. For this to happen, one must keep many aspects in sight in addition to the narrow linguistic ones: the words and metaphors that are chosen (as stressed by Kemp), the meaning that a message will evoke by the simple fact of being delivered by certain institutions or individuals, the use of certain channels and styles (as alluded by Bastide), to name a few, are all factors that affect how people will respond to a message. How many specialists conceive of the possibility that much of the actual impact that the translations listed in the ELP repository will have on the ground depends on these "emotional" aspects, rather than on the mere "well-formedness" of the message? It is difficult to tell. It remains a fact that little attention overall is being given to this key problem in the public discourse with regard to COVID-19 translations.

Language on the Move

HOME   RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US

based on a high degree of control of the source message and of the type of translation—i.e. verbatim translation—aimed to obtain an output that can be created easily and diffused quickly. A typical example is the "do the 5" poster model that Translation Commons has promoted. More than 10% of the languages in the ELP repository have a "do the 5 poster" as their only COVID-19 health information resource.

This is in stark contrast with what Kemp and Bastide (amongst others) are advocating, which is an approach that puts the particular community and its socio-cultural context, rather than the message itself, at the center of the translation efforts. This community-centered approach entails empowering the community itself as the producer of messages, and this is what a number of communities around the world have done for COVID-19 (e.g. listen to this audio message in Triqui, Mexico, or the video messages in Nahuatl described here). However, most communities speaking minority or endangered languages lack the necessary means, knowledge, and tools to do the same.

Out of the many commendable projects that have been launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is one that I have the honor to coordinate which is based on this community-centered approach to translation and aims to empower communities so that they can arm themselves with accurate information and create their own content. This project is called virALLanguages and is a volunteer-run initiative organized by the KPAAM-CAM project, the SOAS World Languages Institute, the Community for Global Health Equity of the University at Buffalo, and the Department of Linguistics of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

A "Town crier" in Bafut, North-West Region of Cameroon (ca. 1960, but the practice is still very much alive) (Image credit: Ritzenthaler, R. & Ritzenthaler, P. 1962, p. 101)

that has the best chance of being accepted by their community. What virALLanguages does, then, is (i) transfer key information about the pandemic to motivated community members, along with some additional background knowledge, (ii) foster the creation of language teams made of at least two people (i.e. a speaker and a "judge" or reviewer, who has the key role of guaranteeing that the final message conveys accurate information), (iii) stress the importance of translating "authority" locally, which means having speakers that are widely known and highly esteemed in the community, and (iv) provide technical and logistical assistance for recordings to be created and diffused according to the various teams' requests (e.g. videos on social media, audio messages broadcast in local radio stations, etc.).

To date, virALLanguages has produced more than 60 resources in over 30 languages of Cameroon, Pakistan, and Ghana: there are "big" languages like Pashto and Akan, but most are minority or endangered languages in which no other resources about COVID-19 prevention measures exist. A drop in the ocean of the world's languages, one might argue. One feature that makes these numbers more significant, though, is that most languages are concentrated in specific areas due to the work of local collaborators: northern Pakistan (12 languages), northwest Cameroon (11 languages), and northern Cameroon (6 languages) are three areas where virALLanguages has concentrated its efforts, and we hope to be soon able to add Indonesia to this list thanks to the collaboration with the Department of Linguistics of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

What is different in virALLanguages resources?

Along with the pandemic of COVID-19, the world is experiencing an infodemic of misinformation about its causes and treatments. In such a context, one of the key problems that virALLanguages aims to tackle is the fact that the credibility of a message must be evaluated from a local perspective. Just to take one example, most people on Earth don't know what WHO (World Health Organization) is and, among those who do, there are many who have mixed feelings about it or only have a vague sense of what it does. This means that a message branded by WHO is not likely to have a great chance of being taken seriously in many communities around the world. This is the reason why many of the virALLanguages videos feature traditional leaders or other personalities that are meaningful to the local audience, like PhD students who are studying abroad, researchers, or singers.

This video is in Mendankwe, a language spoken by about 30,000 people in the area of the city of Bamenda, in the North West Region of Cameroon. It features Mr Herick Abongwa Forsuh, who comes from the family of the Mendankwe traditional rulers (Fon), as is visible from his necklace. The video hit 500 views in less than 2 days.

Over the course of the project, we learned that authority and credibility can be locally constructed in many other ways as well. For example, in some societies of the Cameroonian Grassfields there is a traditional figure that is expected to disseminate information about risks that threaten the society as a whole: this person could be described as the "Town Crier". The Town Crier is normally associated with specific objects (a drum, a double-gong) and ways of speaking.

You can hear below how this traditional resource was leveraged by the Babanki language team in

The audio message can be downloaded here.

Credibility can also be constructed through the use of rich language and the appropriate ways of involving the audience, as Dr Margaret Neh Chenemo (sociolinguist and speaker of Bafut) tells us in this video.

Language
on the Move

HOME RESEARCH ARCHIVES ABOUT US CONTACT US

Conclusion

In a talk I recently gave with Mandana Seyfeddinipur (co-director of virALLAnguages along with Jeff Good), we provocatively raised the question "Can linguists save lives"? Our claim was that, in order to save lives, linguists must be clear on the fact that risk communication is in and of itself an issue of what Dell Hymes called "communicative competence", rather than linguistic competence alone. As I tried to argue in this post, message-centered, verbatim translations are better than nothing, sure, but they leave too many gaps and potential sources of misunderstandings to be considered sufficient if the goal is to convince people to change, albeit temporarily, their behaviors. What we actually need is community-centered, credible messages produced by empowered community members and delivered by locally accepted authority figures and through locally meaningful ways of speaking. VirALLanguages is just the first initiative to take up this challenge and illustrate not only that it can be done, but also how it can be done effectively. As lead coordinator of virALLanguages

Language on the Move

19—in today's connected and threatened world.

Acknowledgments

virALLanguages would have never seen the light without the determination and intelligence of four Master's students in Language Documentation at SOAS – University of London (in alphabetical order): Leonore Lukschy, Yẹwá Ògúnṣẹ̀yẹ, Sydney Rey, and Vasiliki Vita. This post is based on the talk I and Mandana Seyfeddinipur gave on May 28 2020 at the SOAS Alumni "Continuing the Conversation" event series. I thank Sydney Rey and Jeff Good who have commented on a previous version of this post. Thanks go also to Anna Belew, who provided me with updated figures about the ELP repository.

References

Bastide, L. 2018. "Crisis Communication During the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa: The Paradoxes of Decontextualized Contextualization". In M. Bourrier and C. Bieder (eds.) *Risk Communication for the Future. Towards Smart Risk Governance and Safety Management*, 90-104. Springer. (This is a free ebook)

Kemp, E. 2020. "Replacing the language of fear: language and communication in DRC's latest Ebola response", March 2020, odihpn.org

Ritzenthaler, R. & Ritzenthaler, P. 1962. *Cameroons village: an ethnography of the Bafut*. Milwaukee: The North American Press.

Language challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic

Visit here for our full coverage of language aspects of the COVID-19 crisis.

Tags: COVID-19   Digital Communication   Health Communication   Intercultural Communication

Interpreting   Translation

Language on the Move
on the Move

HOME   RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US

Previous Post

Is English spelling an insult to human intelligence?

Next Post

Who

Covid-19

Keyboard, pen, paper, syringe: Covid-19 vaccination as multiple

RESEARCH　　　　ARCHIVES　　　　ABOUT US　　　　CONTACT US
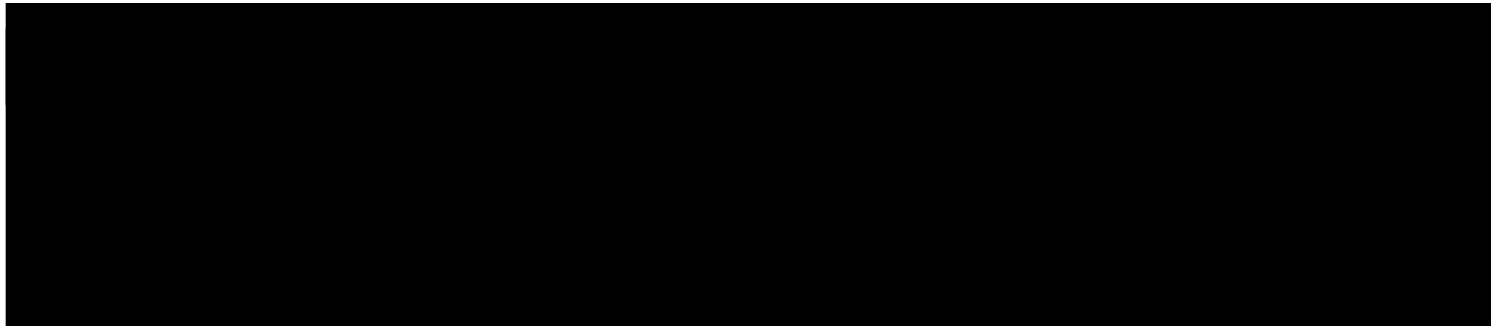
Covid-19

Home schooling in Covid-19: challenges for migrant families

Claire Livesey

Language on the Move

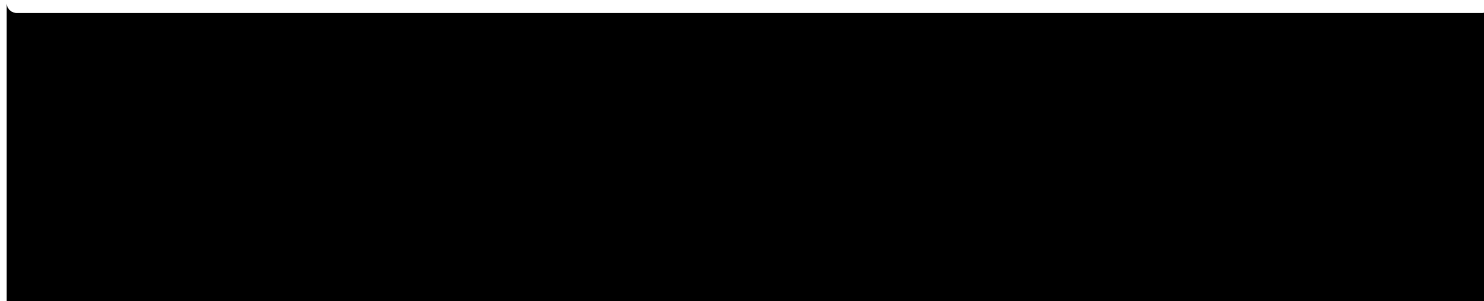RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US
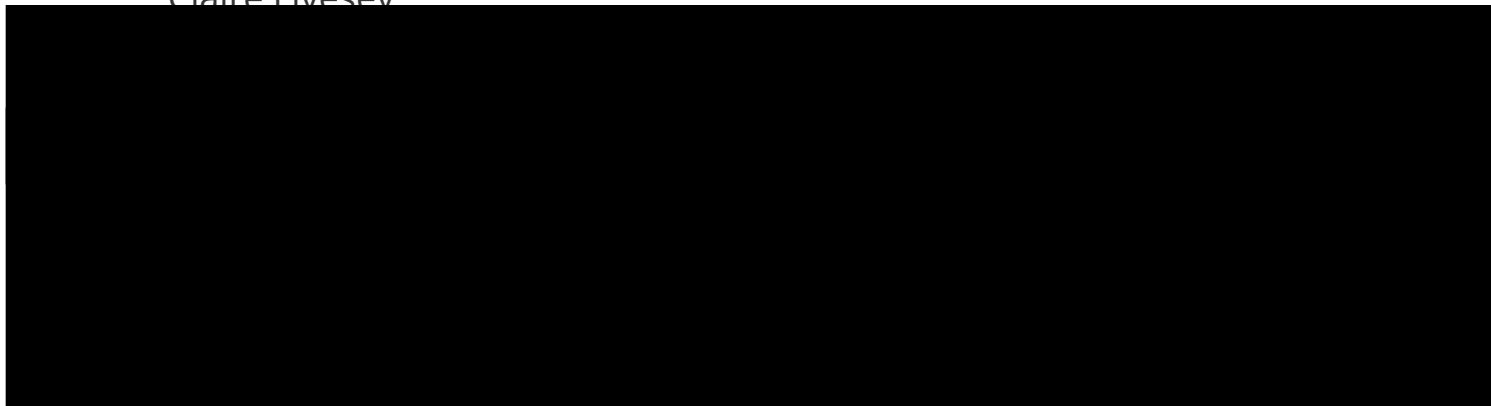
[Covid-19](#)

From language barriers to linguistic resources in COVID safe business registration

Monica Neve

December 14, 2020

Author

Department of Linguistics, University at Buffalo – SUNY.
His areas of interest include the study of traditional
forms of multilingualism in rural Africa, language
documentation, African anthropology, and the
languages and societies of the Hindu-Kush area
(Pakistan – Afghanistan). Pierpaolo has done extensive
fieldwork in Pakistan and Cameroon, has published in
journals like "Language" and the "International Journal
of the Sociology of Language", and currently coordinates
both a research project called KPAAM-CAM (PI Jeff
Good) and the virALLanguages initiative.

More posts by Pierpaolo di Carlo

Join the discussion
3 Comments

Yuta+Koshiba   Reply
October 12, 2020 at 1:25 am

From this article, I agree that risk communication involves "communicative
competence" as the more essential part than only linguistic competence. The
linguistic aspect is one of the perspectives of risk communication, not all. When
people convey to other people accurately what they are saying, it usually need
beyond the language aspects, including multimodal aspects, gesture, context,
culture. This is because there is a possibility of misunderstanding if it is only the

the information is and whether it is believable information. Therefore, with the development of social media, people need to improve digital literacy skills to obtain true information.

Tazin Abdullah
October 7, 2020 at 11:10 am

Reply

I find the statement, "If people understand a message, will that automatically mean that they accept it?" so telling of what has happened in many communities across the world during the COVID19 pandemic. As lockdowns were introduced around the world, information regarding the virus was being disseminated across Bangladesh. From what I read, schools, offices and factories were being shutdown. In Dhaka, the capital city, the substantial numbers whose livelihood is from manual labour were being told very clearly to stay home and police were enforcing the rules on the streets.

At that time, a friend from Dhaka said to me that the poor people of Dhaka understood clearly the message to stay at home but they also said that they would die of hunger before they died of the virus. For this community of people, the message could state unequivocally the dangers of the virus spreading or what could happen to them but it would be unlikely to strike the intended fear and action. In their reality, a lot worse exits and a lot worse may have already happened, so COVID19 would not be the big deal that government information makes it out to be. I think situations like this, it is very important to find ways of communicating that are community-centred and meaningful to the context of those being spoken to.

Ingrid Piller
October 7, 2020 at 2:23 pm

Reply

Thanks, Tazin! Good reminder that being able to comply with a public health directive may be a privilege in some contexts. Communication certainly looks like a second-order problem here ...

HOME   RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US

Name *

Email *

Website

☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.
☐ Notify me of new posts by email.

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER

Language on the Move

HOME   RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US

Language on the Move Retweeted

Emily Farrell
@emilyjfarrell

Replying to @PhilipLaughlin and 4 others

Don't be afraid @PhilipLaughlin! You'll come to see sociolinguistics is the best linguistics. 😃

Embed   View on Twitter

UNTERSTÜTZT VON / SUPPORTED BY

Alexander von Humboldt
Stiftung / Foundation

250 Humboldt

ARCHIVED AT PANDORA

NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

Be the first to know. Sign up now to stay updated on our news and latest posts.

Email Address

Subscribe

RESEARCH   ARCHIVES   ABOUT US   CONTACT US