

ISSN-0974-7192

Journal of
Literature, Culture And Media Studies



N.D.R. Chandra
Richa Verma

Vol. XIV Issues 25-26, 2021

Journal of Literature, Culture And Media Studies

Vol. XIV Issues 25-26, 2021

Journal of Literature, Culture & Media Studies

(ISSN-0974-7192)

Vol. XIV, Issues 25-26, 2021
Website : <http://www.i-scholar.in>
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Nagaland (Central) University,
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***Journal of
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Vol. XIV Issues 25-26, 2021***

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3. Linguistic Issues and Challenges During COVID-19 Health Crisis

Richa Verma*

Abstract : *COVID-19 has amplified another dimension of unabated globalization and ease of mobility, when the humanity was exposed to dangerous proportions of an unknown virus and the ensuing pandemic. In addition to severe health crisis exposing cracks in the fragile nature of our medical preparedness, the situation was further exacerbated our multilingual and multicultural societies, which necessitated availability and flow of general and medical information in multilingual mode. In the absence of a concrete plan in this direction, the exclusion of linguistic minorities from daily discourse on public health communication by global organizations was witnessed. As a consequence, it became evident that sociolinguistics and emergency linguistics approaches should get sufficient focus in order to build trusting resilient communities that have access to timely and appropriate content concerning challenges sweeping the world. It was realized that it is imperative that minoritized languages should be given strong foothold in societies to ensure that collective responses to medical crisis prevention, clinical advice, and mitigation, could be effectively disseminated to grassroot communities around the world. This movement will require keen involvement of academic voices in preparing the right kind of linguistics knowledge base and interface it with professional, policy makers and people at large.*

Keywords : *linguistics; multilingual communication; language challenges; emergency communication; information flow and overload*

The COVID-19 pandemic spawned a crisis of epic proportions, where the outbreak in China spread across the world and brought our lives to standstill, and led to unprecedented fatalities in the era of modern medicine. The coining of a new name for the disease effortlessly entered our vocabulary with the distinction of becoming one of the fastest adopted new word in the global linguistic repertoire. Notably, getting acquainted with the name of the new disease was also accompanied with many new terms such as "social distancing", "home quarantine", or "flattening of the curve", which

were associated with particular social activities necessary to avoid getting afflicted with the debilitating virus.

In recent times, a health-related mass communication exercise has never been observed at the global scale in a relatively short period of time. The advisories issued by authorities, public health debates, economic and political ramifications of the disease, became part of a complex knowledge dissemination process where the urgent need for effective multilingual communication was brought to the fore. The entire world population was supposed to understand predominantly English-based advisories and expected civic measures, coming from local, national and global agencies. These issues highlighted linguistic issues and challenges for rapid information dissemination in order to realize COVID-19 appropriate behavior and for general awareness.

Linguistic Issues in Public Communication

Global public communication critically relies on a very small number of spoken languages, which reflects upon our inadequacy to convey messages globally in non-dominant language spoken regions. This problem further compounded during pandemic when the lacunae of language constraints did not permit equitable dissemination of pandemic-related information when the humanity stood on the crossroads of a global emergency. Clearly, the linguistic preferences and hierarchy was a huge impediment to the right-of-knowledge.

It is worth to mention that the World Health Organization (WHO) made the pandemic-related information available in six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish) and three additional languages (German, Hindi, Portuguese), with a great predominance in favour of the English language (WHO, 2019).

It is alarming to note that such skewed linguistic preferences excluded a sizeable number of linguistic minorities thereby preventing them from an equitable access to health and welfare. Avineri and coworkers argued that language is a central concern for equal education opportunities, blending in a fabric of society, and in controversies that involves social inequality (Avineri, 2019). These inequalities are significant in culturally diverse societies and are further compounded during crises when reliable information becomes crucial for the consumption of general public, healthcare professionals, administrators and policy makers (Lo Bianco, 2010). Any misstep in communicating message in a dominant language that is outside the comfort zone of linguistic repertoire of the common people exacerbates situation instead of solving it, and the eventual penalty is more heavy for linguistic minorities when compared to the majority (Uekusa, 2019; Andrulis, 2007). Without an overstatement, it is quite evident that the inter-dependence between linguistic diversity and health literacy are yet to be fully realized

for the service of humankind. A beginning in this direction has to realize success at many levels in order to achieve the desired goals.

The present problem of reaching a given population with the right information is mired not only with complex language barriers and high volumes of information overload, but also by inherent trust deficit in official communications that may even relate to critical health data and civic advisories. Moreover, deliberate misinformation campaigns and fake information adds to the burden of knowledge dissemination to the most needy sections of the society that are dependent on off-the-mainstream linguistics to serve them. Information overload, in dominant or non-dominant languages, may also lead to sub-optimal and compromised decision making, which could be misleading and fatal in context of health related, pandemic-like scenarios (Feinberg, 2015; Wilson, 2001).

Information Overload and Communication During COVID-19

It is important to note that COVID-19 pandemic did highlight the need for health professionals to critically assess prevailing information environment with the right linguistic preferences and carefully reduce information overload during ensuing panic, so that the society is served with appropriate content in the language of their choice (Hong, 2020). These authors concluded that the cognitive capacity of the audience, exposure to information sources, and communication modalities were critical determinants of information overload processing where it was shown that a greater preference was for heuristic processing based on their personal choices. On the contrary, the use of systematic processing led to more rational approaches of preventing disease through a thorough understanding of the disease. A number of research papers have dealt with the issue of linguistics and motivation of sociolinguistics scholars to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. Some salient points covering these ideas include:

1. Public health information to linguistically-diverse population.
2. Ready accessibility of health information marginalized sections of the society such as minority groups, migrant workers and differently abled people.
3. Strategies to surmount language barriers during the pandemic.
4. Translation and multilingual technical terminology concerning health and medical research.

However; it is also known that mere existence of multilingual communication network is insufficient to ensure that public health messages and advisories are of good quality and clarity. The latter could be assessed along the following three verticals (O'Brien et al. 2018; O'Brien and Federici 2019):

1. Availability of public communication
2. Accessibility across multiple platforms

3. Accuracy of information
4. Adaptability to emerging crisis

The complete absence of multilingual crisis communication in many parts of the world was evident at the beginning and during the pandemic. Such a situation was brought out decades of indifference in strengthening multilingual systems to reach out in the society and an oversight in not elevating non-English languages as a communication medium. Downplaying multilingualism has been a bane in conveying the right message to the minoritized groups and excludes them from vital health information, specially during a raging pandemic where much of the global population was eagerly awaiting positive news in countering the virus and neutralizing COVID-19. Thus, it is amply clear that in addition to advances in healthcare and medical technology, multilingual communication should be a top priority for future disaster preparation strategies (Yuming, 2020). These authors proposed conceptualization of a 'national emergency communication plan' around the following four verticals:

1. Communication during crisis
2. Communication for building trust
3. Bouquet of language types for reaching out
4. Technical preparedness and capacity building

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened many cracks in our preparedness to deal with large scale health disasters. Communicable nature of newly identified viral diseases has created a profound impact on our daily lives, our habits, our travel patterns, and our social lives, to name a few. Inevitably, the prolonged pandemic caused a lot of disturbance in personal lives, damaged openness in the civic society, created divisions due to social distancing and by seeding a looming fear of virus transmission. Epidemics indeed have a way to engender stigma and induce social chaos for a foreseeable future (Briggs, 2005). Thus, the language challenges experienced during COVID-19 not only concern the dissemination of correct information, but is also implicated in building the correct structure of emergency communication to address the four verticals of 'national emergency communication plan' as mentioned above.

The current global crisis has forced us to reevaluate our understanding of multilingual crisis communication, with a special impact on the discipline of sociolinguistics. It has become abundantly clear that sociolinguistics is the need of the hour and the evolving developments should put general population, healthcare workers, and policy makers at the centre to maximize the impact by engaging within diverse social networks (Hodge, 2016). Such initiatives will allow us to be better prepared for future multilingual health crisis communication challenges and we will be able to rapidly bring the right information to the stakeholders (Ahmad, 2020; Hopkyns, 2020).

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*School of Languages, CSJM University, Kanpur - 208 012 (U.P.)

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B-19, Central Avenue,
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FORM IV

Place of Publication : New Delhi, India

Period of its Publication : Biannual

Printer's Name : SHIKSHAN
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Editor's Address : Professor, Dept. of English,
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Phone: 0370 2291470
Cell: 09436604508 / 8839846685
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