Linguistic diversity and public health: sociolinguistic perspectives on COVID-19

Call for papers for a special issue of *Multilingua* devoted to "Linguistic diversity and public health: sociolinguistic perspectives on COVID-19" edited by Ingrid Piller, Jie Zhang, and Jia Li.

The communication of public health information is a key aspect of the containment of contagious diseases. In fact, communication has been such a major aspect of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that it has been said to be accompanied by an "infodemic", where many populations do not have access to sufficient reliable information while simultaneously being swamped with misleading information.

Public health professionals agree that, during an epidemic, the availability of timely high-quality information is vital, not only for the general public but also health professionals and decision makers at all levels.

Language barriers may compromise the timeliness and the quality at which public health information is accessible to linguistically diverse populations, at global, national, and local levels.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) dedicated information website on the novel coronavirus disease, for instance, is available in the six official UN languages Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The same is true for Google SOS Alerts, and these are now being expanded to other languages.

WHO information is directed at member states, who are tasked with localizing relevant information for their populations through their national health authorities. States have taken a wide variety of approaches to the needs of their multilingual populations, ranging from staunchly monolingual communications (such as a White House directive to remove bilingual English-Spanish public health posters) to evolving multilingual and multimodal approaches as the needs of diverse groups have been increasingly recognized in China.

While states are key actors in this crisis, the failure of many state actors or a lack of trust in them has also resulted in numerous grass-roots approaches – both inclusive and exclusive. Linguistic diversity can become the site of exclusion in discriminatory non-state language policies such as those of a Hong Kong restaurant only serving Cantonese- and English-speaking patrons but not Mandarin speakers. At the same time, COVID-19 has also resulted in an outpouring of volunteer translation efforts to make key information available as broadly as possible, as is evidenced by the growing list of translations of the popular *Medium* article "Coronavirus: Why you must act now".

Call for papers

Against this background, we are calling for research submissions from sociolinguists engaged with the language challenges posed by COVID-19 in any context. We are interested in what the public health information needs of multilingual populations are and how these needs are – or are not – being addressed.

This special issue of *Multilingua* is based on an ongoing mini-series of research blogs on *Language on the Move*:

- · Li Jia, Coronavirus meets linguistic diversity

- · Gegentuul Baioud, [Fighting COVID-19 with folklore](#)
- · Zhang Jie, [Racism hinders the fight against COVID-19](#)
- · Yu Lha, [Fighting the coronavirus in local languages](#)

Timeline

April 06, 2020: Abstract due to the editor (ingrid.piller [at] mq.edu.au)
June 08, 2020: Manuscript submission due through *Multilingua's* online submission system
August 10, 2020: Peer-review and production process; rolling virtual publication ahead of print upon acceptance
September 2020: Publication of print issue, 39(5)

About *Multilingua*

Multilingua is a refereed academic journal publishing six issues per volume. It has established itself as an international forum for interdisciplinary research on linguistic diversity in social life. The journal is particularly interested in publishing high-quality empirical yet theoretically-grounded research from hitherto neglected sociolinguistic contexts worldwide.

- · Provides an international forum for interdisciplinary research on linguistic diversity in social life
- · Facilitates exchange of information and experience between academics and practitioners
- · Focuses on neglected sociolinguistic contexts worldwide
- · Features special issues allowing in-depth exploration of specific topics

Topics

- · Bi- and multilingualism
- · Language education, learning, and policy
- · Inter- and cross-cultural communication
- · Translation and interpreting in social contexts
- · Critical sociolinguistic studies of language and communication in globalization, transnationalism, migration, and mobility across time and space