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Chapter 1

Multilingualism: The language of health in Cameroon

Pius W. Akumbu & Pierpaolo Di Carlo

Abstract

Although a linguistically highly diverse country with more than 280 languages spoken within its boundaries, Cameroon favours and operates an official bilingual policy in exoglossic, formerly colonial languages, i.e. English and French as enshrined in its 1996 constitution. The two official languages are used to transmit crucial health information to Cameroonians at all times, including during major disease outbreaks such as cholera and measles. This practice deprives those Cameroonians who are not literate in any of the official languages of access to relevant first-hand health information. Moreover, psycholinguistic research suggests that even bilinguals may receive messages in their native language more positively than messages in a language they have learnt later in life. The advent of COVID-19 has further revealed the unpreparedness of the Cameroonian Government to provide information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best since a majority of the languages are neither developed for use nor empowered by the language policy of the country. Providing a comprehensive overview of both governmental and non-governmental initiatives aimed at disseminating public health information in Cameroon during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter highlights and insists on the necessity to develop and use national languages in official communication particularly when transmitting health related information. If this is done, it will become possible to easily reach out to all Cameroonians with vital health information at all times, including during disease outbreaks

1. Introduction

Although a linguistically highly diverse country with more than 280 languages spoken within its borders, Cameroon favours and operates an official bilingual policy in exoglossic, formerly colonial languages, i.e. English and French, as enshrined in its 1996 constitution. The two official languages are used to transmit crucial health information to Cameroonians at all times, including during major disease outbreaks such as cholera and measles. While this choice surely allows messages to reach a considerable audience as both English and French are the most widely known languages across Cameroon (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020), it leaves out significant portions of its population, especially those who are not or only partially literate in any of the official languages. It must also be kept in mind that research on multilingualism, emotions, and cognition has demonstrated that, even if one is a fluent bilingual, messages in one's native language are generally more likely to trigger emotional responses when compared to messages in one's second language, thus making the information more memorable if received in the native language (Harris et al. 2003, Harris et al. 2006, Tyng et al. 2017).

The advent of COVID-19 has revealed the unpreparedness of the Cameroonian Government to provide information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best since a majority of the languages are neither developed for use nor empowered by the language policy of the country. This chapter is based on data from online and secondary sources, including parts that

have previously appeared as Akumbu (2020).¹ The study highlights and insists on the necessity to harness and use the numerous languages of Cameroon in official communication particularly when transmitting health related information. This is the best way to not only reach out to all Cameroonians but also engage them with vital information in the event of any disease outbreak. Other sectors of the country such as education and agriculture will also benefit from a language policy that incorporates the language of each and every Cameroonian.

The study is organized as follows: section 2 presents the multilingual nature of Cameroon and argues that a majority of Cameroonians including those in remote areas of the country are multilingual. Evidence is provided in section 3 that Cameroon favours and operates an official bilingual policy in foreign colonial languages, i.e. English and French, as evidenced in the official communication on COVID-19 that has been limited to these official languages. As demonstrated in section 4, the burden of communicating COVID-19 related information has been shifted to individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that have taken upon themselves to create and disseminate awareness information and preventive measures in national languages. In section 5, the benefits of multilingualism are outlined and it is recommended that the government of Cameroon should adopt a language policy that favours the use of its numerous languages in the domain of health. This is followed by a conclusion in section 6.

2. Cameroon's linguistic diversity and societal multilingualism

Societal multilingualism is a dominant cultural feature in many parts of the world where several languages are used within the same community or by different groups within the same country. In such contexts, most people will use one or more than one language in everyday life, thus exemplifying individual bi- or multilingualism. Cameroon has an incredible cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity and is often referred to as "Africa in miniature". The country has a rich linguistic history and a complex present day language situation, being home to at least 280 living languages (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020). This makes Cameroon one of the most linguistically complex regions in Africa, lying at the intersection of three of the major language families of the continent, i.e. Afro-asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Congo. French and English are official languages of the country, a heritage of Cameroon's colonial past as a colony of both France and Britain from 1916 to 1960.

Eight out of the ten Regions of Cameroon are primarily Francophone, representing 83% of the country's population, and two are Anglophone, representing 17%. Most people in the English-speaking North-West and South-West regions, as well as in parts of French-speaking regions, including the major cities of Bafoussam, Douala, and Yaoundé, use Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) as a lingua franca (Ayafor & Green 2017, Vakunta 2018). Fulfulde also serves as a lingua franca in the Far-North, North, and Adamawa regions while Ewondo (Populaire) is used in much of the Centre, South, and East Regions, while Duala is used in the Littoral region. After the official languages, Fulfulde and CPE are the major languages in terms of number of speakers (Eberhard,

1 The communiques and press releases on which the discussion is based have been collected from WhatsApp and/or Twitter from March 2020 - January 2021. They include those issued by Cameroon's Prime Minister, Head of Government; Minister of State, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic; Ministers of Public Health, Territorial Administration, Communication; Governors of the North-West and South-West Regions, and the North-West Regional Delegate of Public Health.

Simons & Fennig 2020). Camfranglais is a relatively new pidgin communication form that has emerged in urban areas and other locations where French-speaking and English-speaking Cameroonians meet and interact. Popular musicians use the hybrid language, thereby significantly increasing its popularity. American Sign Language, introduced by the deaf American missionary Andrew Foster is used in Cameroon, especially for the education of the deaf.

The two official languages are a superstratum imposed on a very heterogeneous home language substratum giving that Cameroon has a wealth of indigenous languages. As pointed out by Ayafor & Green (2017:15), Schroder (2003) estimates that “90% of Cameroonians are native speakers of an indigenous language, but it is likely that this proportion has decreased and may continue to decrease, given that many young Cameroonians now do not speak their parents’ languages, especially those living in urban centres (e.g. Nnang 2013)”. A number of studies (e.g. Koenig, Emmanuel & Povey 1983, Anchimbe 2006) have demonstrated that Cameroon’s urban centres are characterized by high levels of multilingualism. Recent studies (Connell 2009, Esene Agwara 2013, Ojong Diba 2019, Di Carlo, Good & Ojong Diba 2019, Di Carlo & Good 2020) have also shown that rural multilingualism is not only common in Cameroon but it is much older than its urban counterpart. Di Carlo & Good (2020) argue that individual multilingualism was widespread long before the colonial period and centuries before the continent experienced large-scale urbanization. Ojong Diba (2019: 5), differentiates between urban and rural multilingualism in Cameroon, stating that “multilingualism practised in urban areas is indeed different from that practiced in rural areas like Lower Fungom. In urban areas, multilingualism is intense, typically involving at least one lingua franca, a home language and a colonial language. In rural areas the situation is very different, with the exclusion or minimal use of colonial languages, it is remarkably common for people to have a repertoire of over ten languages which they use very frequently daily.” While ten languages is quite a high figure and not common for a repertoire, there are many people who speak more than two languages in some rural areas of Cameroon (e.g. Connell 2009 for Mambila, Moore 2004 for Mandara).

The point is that the multiplicity of languages in Cameroon is not just in the number of languages found in the linguistic ecology but in the actual use of more than two languages (excluding the official languages) by most Cameroonians whether they are found in urban or rural centres. This forms the basis of the argument in this chapter that using the multitude of languages of Cameroon in the health sector will better serve Cameroonians since each and every citizen will have access to health related information supplied in a language they understand best.

3. Cameroon’s official bilingualism in health (COVID-19) communication

Although a multilingual country, as illustrated in section 2 above, Cameroon favours and operates an official bilingual policy in foreign colonial languages, i.e. English and French as enshrined in its 1996 constitution. The government of Cameroon through its Ministry of Public Health always works relentlessly to ensure that information is transmitted to Cameroonians during major disease outbreaks such as cholera and measles. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Cameroon on March 6, 2020 the government has shouldered the responsibility of constantly informing and updating the public on the evolution of the situation. Various communication channels have been used to inform and sensitize Cameroonians on ways and means to prevent the

spread of COVID-19 in the country. The efforts have been to disseminate information about preventive measures and also to counter misinformation about the spread and prevention of the pandemic. One positive aspect of government's communication on the pandemic has been the use of the two official languages, i.e. English and French, as reflected in some of the communiqués by the Head of State, Prime Minister, Minister of Public Health, Governors of Regions, and Regional Delegates of Health. In the following section, we attempt a comprehensive summary of the main documents that were circulated online, and that constituted the main official sources for communicating risk and preventive measures to all Cameroonians. This list is not meant to represent an exhaustive catalogue of the entire communication that the government has issued during the COVID-19 pandemic as there may have been local initiatives—e.g. based in hospitals or health centers—targeting some national languages. While the latter is possible, we are not aware of any structured attempt in this direction.

Ministry of Public Health

On March 6, 2020 Cameroon's Minister of Public Health issued a press release in French confirming the first case in the country. He (@Manaouda) later tweeted:

The Government reassures that everything is being done to contain this case of importation of the coronavirus. There is no reason to panic. The situation remains under control. The populations must simply continue to observe the usual rules of hygiene. *Le Gouvernement rassure que tout est mis en œuvre pour confiner ce cas d'importation du coronavirus. Il n'y a aucune raison de céder à la panique. La situation reste sous contrôle. Les populations doivent simplement continuer à observer les règles usuelles d'hygiène.*

On March 9, 2020 he issued another press release in French informing the general public that after the second case was confirmed he held a meeting with various stakeholders to discuss ways to fight back the pandemic. As usual, he commented on the meeting in his Twitter account. On March 14 the Minister sent out a third press release in both French and English to announce that the third case of COVID-19 had been confirmed in Cameroon. On March 19, another press release in the two official languages informed the public that the two first cases had been tested negative after 14 days of treatment. The Minister further admonished Cameroonians to continue respecting hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic. On March 30, 2020 the Minister also granted a press conference in French during which he encouraged Cameroonians to observe all the preventive measures prescribed by the government. On September 18, the Minister sent a warning to Cameroonians not to gather in large groups in response to the call for protests by a political party in times when there is an increased risk of the spread of COVID-19. As Cameroon entered the second phase of the pandemic in 2021 the Minister issued Press Release N° D13-15/MINSANTE/SG/CC/CEA2 of 26 January 2021 (shown below) to inform the Cameroonian public that COVID-19 testing and treatment are free of charge and insisted that victims should call a toll free number (1506) if asked to pay.

REPUBLIQUE DU CAMEROUN
Paix - Travail - Patrie

MINISTRE DE LA SANTE PUBLIQUE

SECRETARIAT GENERAL

CELLULE DE COMMUNICATION
DAB-15
N° /MINSANTE/SG/CC/CEA2

REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON
Peace - Work - Fatherland

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH

SECRETARIAT GENERAL

COMMUNICATION UNIT
Yaoundé, le 26 JAN 2021

COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE

Le Ministre de la Santé Publique informe le public que dans le cadre de la lutte contre la propagation du Covid-19 au Cameroun, les tests de dépistage ainsi que la prise en charge des personnes testées positives restent entièrement gratuits sur l'ensemble du territoire national, conformément aux prescriptions du **Président de la République, Son Excellence Paul BIYA**.

Toutes les manœuvres destinées à faire payer des services aux patients dans le cadre de la gestion de la pandémie du Covid-19 doivent être dénoncées.

A cet effet, le Dr. MANAOUDA MALACHIE invite tous les usagers à signaler toute tentative d'arnaque en appelant gratuitement le **1506**, numéro vert mis en service au Ministère de la Santé Publique, aux fins de recueillir des dénonciations de marchandage des services de la part des préleveurs véreux.


Dr. Manouada Malachie

REPUBLIQUE DU CAMEROUN
Paix - Travail - Patrie
MINISTERE DE LA SANTE PUBLIQUE
SECRETARIAT GENERAL
CELLULE DE COMMUNICATION

D13-15
N° _____ /MINSANTE/SG/CC/CEA2

REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON
Peace - Work - Fatherland
MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH
SECRETARIAT GENERAL
COMMUNICATION UNIT

Yaoundé, le 26 JAN 2021

PRESS RELEASE

The Minister of Public Health informs the public that as part of the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in Cameroon, screening tests as well as the management of people who test positive remain completely free throughout the country, in accordance with the prescriptions of the **President of the Republic, His Excellency Paul BIYA.**

All schemes intended to charge patients for services as part of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic must be denounced.

To this end, Dr. MANAOUDA MALACHIE urges all users to report any attempted rip-off by calling the toll-free number **1506**, in service at the Ministry of Public Health, in order to collect complaints of service bargaining from dishonest technicians.


Manoanda Malachie

Apart from the press releases, the Minister's Twitter account has been a major outlet of information and updates during this period. There have been tweets on a daily basis and interestingly, they have been in both French and English, as illustrated by the following tweets.

May 25, 2020

It is important to note that we are entering a complicated phase of the pandemic. Therefore, more than ever, we must protect ourselves, protect our families and protect others by observing barrier gestures. Wear a mask when going out and wash your hands regularly.

Il est important de noter que nous entrons dans une phase compliquée de la pandémie. Nous devons donc, plus que jamais, nous protéger, protéger nos familles et protéger les autres en observant les gestes-barrières. Portez un masque en sortant et lavez-vous régulièrement les mains.

February 23, 2021

We have just recorded 07 deaths in one week and witnessed a rise in contaminations, especially in the Littoral, Centre and North Regions, representing 1607 new cases in just one week. It is therefore urgent to regain awareness and to respect the barrier measures. Get on your masks!

Nous venons d'enregistrer 07 décès en une semaine et une remontée de la contamination surtout dans les Régions du Littoral, du Centre et du Nord, soit 1607 nouveaux cas en une semaine. Aussi est-il urgent de reprendre conscience et de respecter les mesures barrières. A vos masques.

While this is a laudable attitude that indicates a clear instance of the respect of the constitution and official language policy of Cameroon it has obviously been to the disadvantage of those Cameroonians who are not literate enough to benefit from written-only materials in any of the two official languages.

Other Ministries

Other ministers have also issued COVID-19 related communiqués in the official languages. The Minister of Territorial Administration signed order N° 000012/A/MINAT on March 17, 2020 regulating the exercise of freedom of movement of persons and goods and limiting the exercise of sociocultural and profit-making activities as part of the plan to fight against the coronavirus pandemic. A joint Press Release in French from the Ministers of Territorial Administration, Public Health, Social Affairs, and Promotion of Women and the Family was issued on April 29, 2020 to reveal a plan for the distribution of materials that could be used to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Minister of State, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic sent out a communiqué on April 22, 2020 to inform the public of the cancellation of Labour Day and National Day celebrations to ensure respect of the social distancing measures prescribed by the government

to fight COVID-19. On May 13, 2020 the Minister of Communication issued a statement on preventive measures and support to the country's economy within the framework of the national efforts to fight against the pandemic. A similar move came from the Minister of Youth Affairs and Civic Education on February 5, 2021 cancelling the 2021 traditional match past activities that always take place during the Youth Day celebration on February 11.

Cameroon's Prime Minister, Head of Government has been responsible for informing the public about government's response strategy to the coronavirus pandemic. On March 17, 2020 he issued a special statement in both English and French outlining the preventive measures to be observed from March 18, 2020. Another statement in the two official languages followed a week later on March 24, 2020 reminding and calling for reinforcement and respect of the measures prescribed on 17 March, 2020. On April 30, 2020 another statement to relax some of the measures of March 17 and to insist on the strict respect of the measures still in force was issued in English and French. On May 15, 2020 a new statement came from the Prime Minister updating and authorizing the reopening of schools from June 1, 2020. The statement was in both official languages. As with the communications from the Minister of Health those from the Prime Minister have not reached directly to those Cameroonians who are not literate in the official languages of the country.

Regional Governors

Regional governors have also sent out announcements on the pandemic in the official languages. Those mentioned here were only in English since they were issued by the governors of the North-West and South-West Regions. For example, on April 20, 2020 the Governor of the North-West region's press release N° 008/L/E/GO/GS announced that the region had recorded its first case of COVID-19 and invited the inhabitants of the region to respect all measures prescribed by the government against the pandemic. This was followed by release N° 009/L/E/GO/GS on April 23, 2020 confirming the second case in the region. Radio communique N° 002/C/E/SGNO/SG of February 12, 2021 notified the population of the region of the effects of the second wave of COVID-19 and called on everyone to respect the prevention measures put in place by the state and also to participate in the mass testing exercise from February to April 2021. On March 31, 2020 the governor of the South-West Region issued release N° 0283/L/G/GSW/19/GRS prohibiting eating and drinking in public places throughout the region. This was followed by a communique on March 4, 2020 instituting the obligatory wearing of facemasks by all those visiting public services in the Region.

Regional Delegations of Public Health

The Regional Delegate of Public Health for the North-West Region has also sent out several press releases on the pandemic in English. For example, press release N° 003/A/NWR/RDPH was issued on March 20, 2020 to counter information that had earlier been circulated to the effect that a case of COVID-19 had been recorded in the region. He, however, called on the population to be vigilant, respect all prevention measures and avoid taking non-prescribed medication or buying hand sanitizers from unknown sources. Press release N° 003/PR/NWR/RDPH of April 25, 2020 notified the community that the third, fourth, and fifth cases had been confirmed and called on everyone to strictly respect prescribed preventive measures and to report any suspected cases

by calling numbers that were provided. On May 1, 2020 the Regional Delegate again issued press release N° 004/A/NWR/RDPH announcing that the region already had 11 confirmed cases. He further called on the population to be vigilant and to expose any suspected cases. Press release N° 006/A/NWR/RDPH of May 19, 2020 specified that there were already 44 COVID-19 cases and 09 deaths in the region and that everyone should be extremely alert and report any suspected cases immediately by calling the numbers he indicated. On May 25, 2020, press release N° 007/A/NWR/RDPH revealed that systematic testing of corpses for COVID-19 is being done to identify those that might have died of it and advise mourners to take precautionary measures to protect themselves. The Regional Delegate has also publicized, through various social media outlets, a North West Regional Call centre for COVID-19 available 24/7. He has provided both land-line and mobile phone numbers that can be called if any person in the community is suspected to have COVID-19 symptoms. He explains that using the call centre numbers will enable proximity communication around the pandemic and decongest the original number (1510) which is rather highly solicited. It should be noted that all these information and press releases have been in English, directly excluding the uneducated inhabitants of the region from understanding and implementing the recommendations provided.

Head of State

The most relevant and highly awaited communication regarding COVID-19 was the Head of State's address to the nation on 19 May, 2020. The unusual address was necessitated by the pandemic which had forced the government to cancel the annual celebration of its national day which always takes place on May 20. The Head of State found it necessary to address the nation and add his personal voice to the fight against COVID-19. As expected, his message was in French followed by a translation in English. Needless to point out that a majority of Cameroonians who do not understand any of the two official languages either received only second hand interpretations or missed out completely on the President's input.

In concluding this section, we must stress that one of the unfortunate outcomes of the use of written-only materials in these two official languages is that the intended sensitization information and call to action directly reach only those who are literate enough in French or English to understand information provided in these languages. Statistics from 2018 show that up to 15 per cent of Cameroonians aged 15-24, 23 per cent aged 25-65, and 60 per cent above 65 years are illiterate.² As Chumbow (2013) has pointed out, at least 60 per cent of the population in most African countries are not literate in the official languages such as English and French and are, therefore, marginalized and excluded from knowledge on health and development. In response to this shortcoming, certain individuals and organizations have embarked on communicating relevant COVID-19 information in national languages of Cameroon, as illustrated in the next section.

4. COVID-19 related communication in national languages

Since many individuals and NGOs are aware of the fact that government's communication in the official languages does not reach many Cameroonians, they have taken upon themselves to create and disseminate awareness information and preventive measures in national languages.

² <http://uis.unesco.org/country/CM>. Accessed on May 6, 2020.

WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube have been flooded with messages from medical doctors and lay persons to their fellow villagers in their mother tongues in a bid to reach out to them directly with information on the prevention of COVID-19. Various community radios have also graciously communicated information in national languages. Some have been translations of WHO's messages while others have simply been personal understanding and experiences that have been shared.

Beyond the individual initiatives that have witnessed the production and dissemination of video and audio messages, numerous national and international organizations have embarked on efforts to sensitize Cameroonians.

Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy

At the national level the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL) has produced a booklet *What you need to know about the Coronavirus or COVID-19*. The booklet which is based on information from the WHO is meant to highlight preventive measures and attitudes that people need to adopt. The Director of CABTAL has stated in an interview with the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) on April 14, 2020 that the book summarizes basic ideas about COVID-19, defines some key words and answers the following questions: "What is coronavirus?, Which categories of persons are vulnerable?, What are the symptoms?, What are the channels of transmission?, How can someone be protected?, What can someone do if they are infected?" By April 14, 2020 the booklet had been translated into 21 languages and work was still going on to complete the translation into 19 other languages and bring the total to 40. Responding to the question of how the message gets to the masses, the Director pointed to three channels. First, he said printed materials are distributed by mother tongue literacy teachers. Secondly, he explained that CABTAL also uses various social media platforms to share the messages which are also found on CABTAL's website <https://www.cabtal.org/en/welcome-cabtal>. Finally, he added that some community radios participate in sharing the information during dedicated slots. CABTAL's Director justified the action of the organization by stating that "with efforts like this from CABTAL, it is clear that those in the suburbs with no mastery of Cameroon's official languages will certainly have information on how to combat the deadly COVID-19." According to him, since the official languages are not always understood by people in the grassroots, CABTAL is specialized in working with local communities to translate relevant messages into their languages. He concludes that "having this material in the mother tongue is our contribution to fight the COVID-19 pandemic."

Cameroon Academy of Young Scientists

The Cameroon Academy of Young Scientists (CAYS) also produced a video with sensitization information for the fight against COVID-19 in Cameroon Pidgin, Duala, Tupuri, Babanki, Medumba, Akoose, Lamnso', Bazou, Basaa, Yemba, Mubako, Ghomala', Mbo'o, and Ngemba. CAYS has noted that their gesture is crucial because most information about COVID-19, including prevention strategies have been disseminated chiefly in the official languages, to the disadvantage of those who cannot find basic health information in their first language to protect themselves and their communities from the pandemic. This video has been distributed widely and it has certainly

reached a greater audience particularly those Cameroonians who understand their community languages more than the official English and French.

virALLanguages

An international project that has invested and dedicated much energy to produce and distribute COVID-19 related messages in Cameroon's national languages is virALLanguages (<http://virallanguages.org>). This project has been made possible by the joint efforts between the Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism – Cameroon (KPAAM-CAM) project (University at Buffalo, SUNY, USA), the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) World Language Institute (UK), the Community for Global Health Equity of the University at Buffalo, and the Department of Linguistics of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (USA). It is stated on their website that their aim is to “reach as many people as possible sharing reliable and memorable information so people know what to do to stop the spread of coronavirus. We focus on endangered languages starting from those spoken in Cameroon, thanks to our existing network of collaborators. But we want the project to go global and provide culturally-appropriate translations of WHO advice in as many “tiny” languages as possible”. The principal output of virALLanguages are video and audio recordings in minority, endangered, or otherwise marginalized languages of the world.

It happens that Cameroon is privileged to have been the starting point for virALLanguages. As of February 5, 2021, information from the WHO on COVID-19 has been adapted and translated into Aghem, Ajumbu, Babanki, Bafut, Buu, Giziga, Mafa, Mambila, Masa, Mendanwke, Mofu-Gudur, Moloko, Mundabli, Munken, Ngemba, Noni, Obang, Oshie, and Zaah-Biyah. More projects to translate into other national languages are in progress. As stated in virALLanguages' website, giving out memorable information is vital and “communicating information that people can understand and trust is only possible through native speakers who are able not only to translate from a major language to a local one, but also to adapt features of the translated text in ways that make it more appropriate to the environment, customs, and speech style that are most relevant to each language community. Proverbs, metaphors, and diverse rhetorical strategies are key to get the information across in a way that will enable behavioural change necessary to save lives. It is also important for any specific examples to be tailored to local ways of living. For example, recommendations to disinfect doorknobs will be meaningless in places where doorknobs are hardly found.”

On top of its general features and output, it is important to look at the virALLanguages project because it is based on a collaborative model between academics and local language communities that aims at a balanced communication where efforts to produce and disseminate culturally-appropriate information will not run counter to its accuracy. In order to do this, the project has adopted a strict protocol to regulate people's participation that might be easily replicated and adapted to any scale and topic of communication (see figure 1 and <https://virallanguages.org/protocol/>).

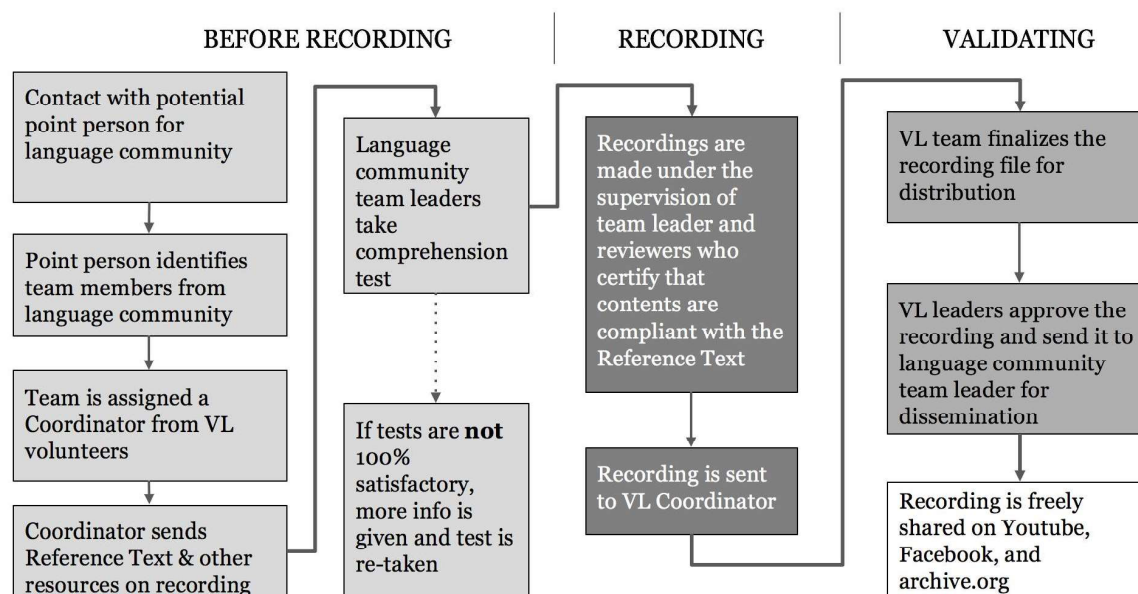


Figure 1: the protocol that was adopted by the virALLanguages project (“VL” in the figure).

Other initiatives

At the international level, various agencies have expressed the need to communicate relevant information to people in their mother tongues which, in many countries, are minority languages. Translators Without Borders has highlighted the importance of language for effective communication in the fight against COVID-19. In its March 2020 policy brief they have answered the question “Do you speak COVID-19?”.³ Among other things they have pointed out that communicating in international lingua francas or national languages makes marginalized people more vulnerable and that misinformation and mistrust flourish when communication does not clearly answer people’s questions. They insist that relevant information should be communicated to everyone in the language they understand best, i.e. their mother tongue.

SIL International has embarked on the translation and distribution of relevant COVID-19 related information into lesser-known local languages around the world. As the pandemic continues to threaten communities worldwide, various actions are being taken to stop the spread and save lives. Individuals are able to take actions to protect themselves and families based on access to clear and relevant information and preventive measures. Unfortunately, SIL International estimates that 30% of people everywhere cannot find basic health information in their first language to protect themselves and their communities from the pandemic. For this reason, the NGO has launched a COVID-19 Fund soliciting donations to fund the planned translation and distribution.⁴

³ https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TWB_PolicyBrief-COVID19.pdf. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

⁴ https://www.sil.org/covid-fund?fbclid=IwAR3G6o0_w5S09Bk5cUSRrlcnxPIASdvcKHUwBe67U99d3LuHtDSuVJ8c3o. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

A report of April 3, 2020 by RFI titled “Grassroots solidarity as Covid-19 information is translated into African local languages”⁵ presents grassroots efforts to translate information on how to prevent coronavirus – washing hands, keeping a distance from others, coughing into your elbow – into various African languages. Grassroots efforts of this nature have involved languages of Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Africa, Morocco, Ethiopia, and Eritrea while many others are still underway.

Building on the power of community and the service of volunteer translators from across the continent, the Engage Africa Foundation⁶ has initiated a crowdsourced project to translate evidence-based preventive guidelines primarily from the World Health Organization (WHO) into several African languages to make them accessible, informative and easy to understand.

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) has conducted an online survey on the use of minority languages under the COVID-19 outbreak between March and April 2020.⁷ The questionnaire focused on the availability of information related to COVID-19 in general, healthcare information related to the outbreak, the existence of an emergency hotline operated in minority languages and the availability of online education in mother tongue. The survey results presented on May 11, 2020 show that “key general information on the coronavirus outbreak is available in the language of minority communities and language groups in slightly more than half of the cases (52%), provided most often by regional government, minority organizations as well as minority press. Similar to the general COVID-19 related information, key health related information in minority languages is available in slightly more than half of the cases (52% again). In case of health related information, local and regional governments are more active.”

With only half of the users of minority speakers across Europe having access to vital information on the pandemic the need to step up efforts and make information available in all minority languages of the continent is obvious. Cameroon and the rest of the world should implement similar communication strategies to successfully combat the spread of COVID-19. This is crucial because a lot of information on COVID-19 is circulating – some more reliable than others and it can be stressful to sort through differing messages especially when they are not in someone’s mother tongue.

5. Multilingualism and health in Cameroon

Despite Cameroon’s rich linguistic diversity, the country has continued to implement a language policy that is based on foreign languages, i.e. English and French, and which falls short of responding adequately to the needs and aspirations of its citizens. At this critical moment when COVID-19 is spreading exponentially and claiming lives, the demand of a thorough review of this policy is compelling. The need for an integrative policy, in fact, one that carefully considers the country’s numerous languages is not only real but extremely urgent.

The place and role of multilingualism in all facets of life has been widely recognized. Multilingualism is believed to be indispensable in education, health, and nearly all areas of life. Africa’s

⁵ <http://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200403-grassroots-solidarity-as-covid-19-information-translated-into-african-local-languages>. Accessed on May 12, 2020

⁶ <http://www.engageafricafoundation.org/covid-19>. Accessed on May 12, 2020

⁷ <https://www.fuen.org/en/article/Do-You-Speak-Corona-Many-European-countries-do-not-offer-information-on-the-pandemic-in-minority-languages>. Accessed on May 12, 2020

multilingualism and cultural diversity is at the same time a challenge and an asset that must, at long last, be put to use. Multilingualism is normality in Africa. In fact, multilingualism is the norm everywhere. It is neither a threat nor a burden. It is not a problem that might isolate the continent from knowledge and the emergence of knowledge-based economies, conveyed through international languages of wider communication (Ouane & Glanz 2010: 5). Multilingualism is viewed as the language of sustainable development by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).⁸ Recognizing both the importance of multilingualism and its complexity, UNESCO is promoting Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE); it is an education that begins in the language that the learner speaks most fluently, and then gradually introduces other languages. This approach is key towards achieving equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, as stipulated in the fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4). UIL's director has reiterated that recent neuro-scientific findings (e.g. Bialystok 2017) suggest that speaking several languages develops the brain. Hence, being actively multilingual actually changes a person's brain structure in a way that improves memory, helps process information, and develops multitasking skills. In addition, speaking multiple languages could actually delay the effects of certain brain diseases that usually cause a decrease in the ability to think and remember.

Besides its effects on academic performance and on learning, multilingualism is also often considered as a factor of peace. The experience of the European Union in promoting linguistic diversity and multilingualism, including through sophisticated and well-funded European education exchange programmes such as ERASMUS,⁹ probably provides the most advanced form of such a policy. Regional initiatives to build peace through education and multilingualism are also present in other parts of the world, notably in Africa, where cross-border African languages are being promoted. Recognizing this trend, UNESCO chose 'Languages without borders' as the theme for International Mother Language Day in 2020 to recognize the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity for sustainable development and peace. Multilingualism constitutes a powerful instrument to foster tolerance and respect for others; it creates an opening for dialogue. In this increasingly complex and multicultural world, marked by globalization and international migration, dialogue is essential for finding peaceful and sustainable solutions. Multilingualism enhances understanding and appreciation of cultural values of the societies that are contained in the concerned languages. The experiences gained from learning different languages tend to change the attitudes, skills, beliefs of the people, society and create an expansion of one's world-view. By opening the dialogue between languages, multilingualism can establish a dialogue between people and be a promise of peace and a sustainable future. From the economic perspective, multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today's job market. Besides the academic and professional credentials, employers also look for fluency in multiple languages as an added advantage. Therefore, being a multilingual is a plus to any job seeker in this millennium. Regarding nation building, multilingualism helps in developing and maintaining national unity especially if people learn national languages besides their indigenous languages and the lingua francas. In the process, people automatically embrace the value of togetherness.

⁸ <https://thelifelonglearningblog.uil.unesco.org/2020/02/21/multilingualism-the-language-of-sustainable-development>. Accessed on February 22, 2021.

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en. Accessed on February 22, 2021.

If multilingualism is such an important asset in various domains of life, it can only be more useful in the area of health. Studies that have examined the neglect of languages in multilingual contexts have found numerous negative consequences on health. Language barriers are associated with lack of awareness about health care benefits (Feinberg, Swartz, Zaslavsky, Gardner & Walker 2002), longer duration of consultation and visit times but fewer follow up visits (Kravitz, Helms, Azari, Antonius, & Melnikow 2000), less frequent clinic visits (Derose & Baker 2000), less understanding of the physicians' explanations (David & Rhee 1998, Gerrish, 2001), and more laboratory tests and more emergency room visits (Hampers, Gutglass, Binns & Krug 1999).

To overcome these problems, proposals for various ways to resolve the issues have been made. One obvious solution is to make use of interpretation services (Poss & Beeman 1999, Woloshin, Bickell, Schwartz, Gany & Welch 1995) or to make use of bilingual staff. Akumbu (2020) has recommended the development and use of Cameroon's national languages in official communication particularly when transmitting health related information. We would like to further clarify our viewpoint here by saying that we see two main ways to do this effectively. On the one hand, the Cameroonian government could create units specialized in translating all relevant information into national languages at the relevant ministries. This would require that each ministry concerned, i.e. Public Health, Territorial Administration, Social Affairs, and Promotion of Women and the Family, etc. should employ at least one translator for each of the 250 or so national languages.

On the other hand, a more distributed model would entail that an initial investment is made to create a widespread grassroots network of local language committees—such as those that exist already throughout Cameroon and that have led initiatives to develop literacy materials in national languages—and that these are put in constant communication with the various Ministries. By providing training to select members of language committees, or by complementing them with some specialized staff, they could be the actual producers of messages in their native languages based on the directives received by the Ministries.

To achieve the government's mission of providing healthcare to all its citizens and raising their standards of living, vital information must be made available in the languages the people understand best. As a country that favours the rule of law and protection of human rights, the institutions should seek to provide health related information to its fellow citizens in the language that each citizen understands best. All essential government communication on health and all other domains should, at least, be translated orally into all national languages. This will be the most effective strategy to reach out to every Cameroonian in their mother tongue or home language. Innovations in this domain may become a model for other countries which, like Cameroon, are characterized by a high density of national languages (e.g. Nigeria, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea). Cameroon's linguistic diversity should no longer be perceived "as a principally negative complication for national development" (Simpson 2008). In other words, it should not be viewed as the premise for disunity and an impediment to development but rather as a useful tool for the country's emergence by 2035. Starting from the celebration of the Year of African Languages in 2006 to the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022-2032, the global community is seeking to project multilingualism by giving indigenous languages the place they deserve. As one of the most linguistically diverse countries of the world, Cameroon is in an ideal position to be at the forefront of such challenging initiatives. The key here is how much the government is willing to invest.

6. Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to draw the attention of Cameroon's Government to the weaknesses of its current language policy revealed by the failure to communicate COVID-19 related information to all its citizens in the languages they understand best, i.e. their mother tongues. The pandemic has served as an eye-opener to the reality that using English and French as official languages of communication does not allow messages to reach the entire intended audience because many Cameroonians do not fully master any of these languages, or would be more deeply engaged by the messages only if they were translated in their native language. For many years now, Cameroon has recognized the need to adopt an alternative language policy to fill the gaps created by the dominant English-French language policy. The current policy has demonstrated its limits by virtue of its exclusive and discriminatory nature and should be revised significantly. The COVID-19 experience should awaken Cameroon to the reality that communication during disease outbreaks and all health matters would be most effective if done in the numerous languages of the country. This implies that the formulation of an appropriate and operational language policy that integrates Cameroon's national languages is more urgent now than ever before and should not be neglected.

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