

Migrants in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Migration Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the various issues confronting migrants in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, the language issues which they encounter. And then, I point out lessons to be learned from these issues and draw implications and suggest recommendations relating to language in the context of migration, ultimately outlining a ‘crisis and emergency language competence and plan for migrants’. I argue that there is a great need to reflect on and rethink how language and language resources are used in times during the COVID-19 pandemic in view of the migrants around the world. In this article, I therefore conjecture on the pandemic from a migration linguistic perspective, an interdisciplinary and multidimensional approach to the study of language in the context of migration.

Keywords: Migration linguistics; language and migration; COVID-19 pandemic

Aims and Outline

Migration has been both a key driving force and the major inevitable outcome of the globalization of contemporary global societies. Yet the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (commonly abbreviated as COVID-19) has significantly disrupted and conceivably altered the ways human mobility takes its course. And in this global health crisis, (international) migrants are particularly made vulnerable (all the more). In this article, I identify the various language issues confronting migrants in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. And then, I point out lessons from all these experiences and draw implications and suggest recommendations relating to language in the context of migration, ultimately outlining a ‘crisis and emergency language competence and plan for migrants’. In this article, I therefore conjecture on the pandemic from a migration linguistic perspective, an interdisciplinary and multidimensional approach to the study of language in the context of migration which I proposed earlier (Borlongan, 2019, 2022). Of course, I do hope that this article could be a contribution to the suddenly—as a matter of urgency, of course — growing scholarly literature on the current pandemic, particularly in relation to migration.

Migrants and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Movement is, needless to say, an essential dimension of the migration process. But in these times of pandemic, movement even within national borders has almost stopped. As such, the pandemic has greatly disturbed global migration patterns. The International Organization for Migration (2020b) so emphatically phrases it as: “International human mobility has been drastically reduced, with border closures and travel restrictions of unprecedented scale” (p. 2). Of course, these restrictions and closures became necessary to prevent more catastrophic

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spread of the virus (Linka et al., 2020). In a policy statement, the International Organization for Migration (2020a) also says that the immediate impact of restrictions and closures across the globe is that migrants of virtually all categories have been stranded and unable to move. Migrants have been greatly disadvantaged by the pandemic and the inequality they experience has been further intensified by the global health crisis. The situation of the most vulnerable of migrants has reached unprecedented extremes. And the pandemic's most severely affected sectors — health, services, tourism, transportation, production — are usually served by migrants. Therefore, the case is either migrant workers face economic uncertainty because their source of income has been hit by the situation or the sector they work in faces critical supply gap because migrant workers are unable to perform their work.

Guadagno (2020) succinctly organizes and neatly summarizes the issues confronting migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic as shown in Table 1 below. For the purposes of this article, I have highlighted the most relevant to migration linguistics:

Table 1

Overview of Migrants' Vulnerability to the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Guadagno, 2020, p. 4, emphases added)

Recurring Conditions of Vulnerability	Increased Likelihood of
<p><i>Limited awareness of recommended prevention measures, including due to linguistic barriers</i> Inability to respect social distancing in crowded, multigenerational homes Reliance on public transportation Continued exposure in close contact professions Limited access to key hygiene items Limited personal protective equipment in the workplace</p>	Contracting COVID-19
<p>Lack of entitlement to health care and deprioritization in service provision Lack of access to facilities in underserved locations Limited awareness of options or right to receive health care <i>Language barriers hindering communication with providers</i> Unwillingness to come forward for assistance due to fear of arrest and/or stigmatization</p>	Not accessing appropriate care
<p>Pre-existing pulmonary/respiratory issues due to travel and living conditions Physical weathering Inability to access timely assistance</p>	Showing severe symptoms
<p>Restrained living and outside space during lockdowns <i>Isolation and inability to communicate</i> Obstacles to proper burial of deceased ones Anxiety linked with being stranded, potentially arrested or victim of xenophobic acts</p>	Suffering psychosocial impacts
<p>Discontinued provision of basic assistance and integration services Loss of precarious, unprotected job No inclusion in COVID-19 income support schemes, housing provision programmes or rental subsidies/exemptions Inability to maintain regular migration status</p>	Livelihood and income insecurity

In hindsight, these language-related issues migrants are facing in times of the COVID-19 pandemic which Guadagno has pointed out are actually persistent language problems



migrants have been facing all this time. The current global health crisis only made them more apparent because these issues suddenly became a very urgent concern.

Language and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Truly, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of life, every segment of the society, and every sector of the economy. Expectedly, it has clear ramifications for language and language use, too. Piller, Zhang, and Li (2020) reflect on the different linguistic issues arising from this health crisis and they point out what they refer to as ‘a basis for a sociolinguistics of the COVID-19 pandemic’:

- 1) Limited public health information and health care provisions for speakers of minor languages
- 2) Inaccessibility of public health information for the marginalized segments of the society
- 3) Specific language planning strategies aimed at reducing language barriers during the pandemic
- 4) Analyses of language use in government, mass media, and the Internet most especially COVID-19-related racism and discrimination.
- 5) Translation issues in medicine and public health research

Looking at this list of sociolinguistic issues during the pandemic, two broad generalizations could actually be made: (1) Availability of health information and health care in various languages and (2) racist language directed towards foreigners. It is also worth pointing out that these bases Piller, Zhang, and Li identified dovetail with the issues of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic which Guadagno (2000) listed and I quoted earlier.

Language in the Future of Migration: Post-Pandemic Implications and Recommendations

The world hopes that this pandemic could be over soon. However, historical epidemiology suggests pandemic influenzas usually last two to four years (cf. Esparza, 2020; Patterson, 1986). And while the society is finding ways to give immediate response to the ongoing pandemic, it is also important to look beyond the current situation and to reflect on how the health system, political framework, and social structure could be improved so that the world could better respond to another pandemic such as that of COVID-19. Needless to say, the whole world was put to a standstill when the virus began spreading and the situation like this could have been avoided. Linguistically speaking, and from the point of view of migrants, it might be helpful and even necessary to draw implications and make recommendations so as not to disadvantage migrants because of their linguistic background when another pandemic hits.

Important crucial and essential to keep migrants updated with the current health situation and to provide them with adequate information in a language easily understandable to them. And of course, ultimately, they must be ideally be provided health care in the same language. This language is usually their native language, which, more often than not, is not used in their destination countries. While it might be an impossible undertaking to make available health information and health care in every migrant language represented in a destination country, the goal probably is to translate these information and make these health care provisions to

as many languages possible, or, more categorically, to set a required number of migrants of a certain linguistic background when health information and health care should be provided in their language. As for languages in which no translation nor provision is or could be made available, the government must find a way to be able to reach out to speakers of these languages, most especially in emergency situations such as the current pandemic. But most of all, that health information and health care must be made available to as many languages possible should not only be an implicit goal but it must be clearly directed by legislation and policy. This will not only benefit the migrants but the autochthonous population as well, most especially now that the world is becoming more and more multilingual than ever. Again, realistically speaking, as was said earlier, it is impossible to make health information and health care available in all migrant languages. This could remain an ideal all the while realizing that this idealization could never be achieved practicality-wise.

While a comprehensive linguistic integration program for migrants is hoped for and envisaged, it is admittedly so much easier to be imagined than to be implemented. However, it is recommended that, at the very least, governments of destination countries establish means to provide support to learn the destination country's language and attain a level of proficiency necessary for survival, simple daily activities, and, very importantly as made apparent by the current pandemic, health and emergency situations. As such, the destination country — most especially its government — and migrants could meet halfway: The government (and the society) makes available health information and health care in a language accessible to migrants and then migrants with their basic language proficiency could at the very least convey that they need help and assistance and tell of some details regarding what they need.

Discrimination towards foreigners and migrants has been a perennial problem as the world continued to globalize. And this problem is even made more prevalent in the wake of (global) crises such as the current pandemic. Interim guidance for migrants and refugees has already been provided by the World Health Organization (Regional Office for Europe, 2020). Guagno (2020) highlighted very well these recommendations by the World Health Organization pertaining to stigmatization: (1) Accurate information regarding COVID-19 be made available; (2) social influences be engaged in reducing stigma towards migrants; (3) stories of recoveries of people be told to as many as possible; (4) different ethnic groups and diverse communities be portrayed in resources on the pandemic, and how they are affected as well and how everyone is working towards getting through this pandemic; (5) media reporting be balanced and fair, and rumors leading to stigmatization be avoided; and (6) initiatives and activities in minimizing stereotyping and stigmatization be linked up to create unified movement and positive environment.

But as the World Health Organization (2020) itself points out, this guidance on the situation is 'interim'. It is therefore necessary to put into place a means to ease out discriminatory acts towards migrants. A plethora of suggestions have already been given previously regarding racial discrimination: There exists the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination complemented by national and local legislation punishing such acts. There even are scholarly inquiries and approaches on the matter (cf. About & Levy, 1999). A few more suggestions come to mind in relation to language (and migrants). It is pivotal to raise awareness of linguistic diversity. One way to do this is through multilingual and multicultural basic education. Teaching people about the reality of diversity and multilingualism from their early years will ingrain in them the disposition and even mentality



to veer away from racist acts and xenophobic attitudes. Another is not only the production of multilingual resources on the pandemic but more so the creation of a linguistic landscape which not only recognizes but, more importantly, honors the beauty of multilingualism. This could be done by embellishing spaces with the languages being used by the local society — signs and directions, policies and rules, print and media, and the Internet most prominently. Particularly in significantly monolingual societies, more opportunities to learn and use other languages must be inscribed in language and language-in-education policies.

By and large, aside from better (air) transportation — which, of course, benefited migration, too, so much, connectivity and interconnectedness in the world have been propelled by advanced technology. Indeed, technology is the great enabler of the modern world. Even before the pandemic came, contemporary life had been made easier because of computers, smart phones, the Internet, and social media. And when the pandemic hit, the world immediately knew of it. So while the understanding of the disease and its repercussions still was not clear early on, people still received fair amount of warning of what it could possibly be. Thus said, technology is a useful tool in bridging the gap between the society of the destination country and the migrant, enabling both of them to reach out to each other in a kind of symbiosis which allows for better accessibility of what one needs which the other could give, regardless whether it is the migrant or the society of the destination country which is in need. Particularly helpful enterprises in this matter are computational linguistics and machine translation, and there are so much advancements and developments in these fields of research (cf. Specia & Wilks, 2016) which should be able to lessen the language issues of migrants in times of emergencies.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the conception of Li, Rao, Zhang, and Li (2020) for an overall structure for a national emergency language competence. Such a language competence is built around four dimensions:

- 1) Crisis stage: Preparation, rescue, and recovery phases
- 2) Communication task: Information provision, trust building, and minimizing misinformation
- 3) Language type: Standardized national language, non-standard varieties, minority languages, major international languages, migrant languages, and signed languages/Braille
- 4) Capacity: Linguistic talent, human resources, technical resources, and databases

Their idea for an emergency language competence might prove useful for national governments and even so for local governments. And, as pointed out by the dimension on language types, national emergency language competence covers languages of the migrant population. Indeed, the inclusion of migrants in national emergency plans is not only a responsibility of governments but more so an inherent right of migrants as humans.

Towards a Crisis and Emergency Language Competence and Plan for Migrants

Yet pushing Li, Rao, Zhang, and Li's (2020) idea even further, I am compelled, particularly during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, to propose a 'crisis and emergency language competence and plan for migrants'. It is most useful to have the following strands or components in the said plan:

- 1) Pre-migration and in-migration orientation regarding crises and emergencies for migrants: Orientation must be given to migrants as to how to act and what to do during crisis and emergency situations supplied with the necessary local language needed to carry out such contingency plans. This kind of orientation must be given both by the origin country government before departure and by the destination country upon arrival.
- 2) Information and instruction for a migrant-inclusive plan during crises and emergencies for citizens and other local residents: When citizens and other local residents are given information and instruction regarding crises and emergency situations, they must also be taught and trained as to how to include in their community action plan migrants, new residents, and even foreigners who might not be too familiar with the place and not too proficient in the language to help themselves in these situations.
- 3) Provision for multilingual health information and health care: Governments of destination countries must continuously strive to enrich their material and human resources to be able to provide health care to a multilingually and multiculturally diverse populations particularly during crisis and emergency situations.
- 4) Training for health care providers for a multilingually-diverse population: Doctors, nurses, and other health care workers must be equipped with basic emergency response and interactional strategies for migrants needing health care who are not proficient in the local language and must likewise be given support and resources to seek out further language assistance when need arises.
- 5) Government agencies in charge of migrants particularly during crises and emergencies: Specialized government agencies must be set up to respond to the needs of migrants during crisis and emergency situations and they must be able to (a) ensure there is adequate health care provision for migrants, (b) censure and penalize discriminatory and racist attitudes, actions, and language towards migrants, and (c) provide accessible, multilingual mental health support for migrants.
- 6) Coordination plans with national governments and embassies of migrants: Officials in charge of dispensing help during crisis and emergency situations must have immediate contact with national governments and embassies of migrants, particularly those whose language is not readily available in the local human and material resources.

Clearly, the burden of the above-proposed plan is the government, particularly that of the destination country. But at the same time, migrants must also take their fair share in making sure they will be able to survive crises and emergencies. While we expect governments of destination countries to provide the necessary system and infrastructure in aid of migrants, migrants themselves must also make themselves aware of how to act during these situations. They must know where to get help in a language accessible to them and they must know how to seek basic help in the local language of their destination countries. They must orient themselves with the implementing system and infrastructure of the destination country in getting help during crises and emergencies.



Summary and Conclusion

In summary, I argue that there is a great need to reflect on and rethink how language and language resources are used in times during the COVID-19 pandemic in view of the migrants around the world. I presented key issues relating to language as regards migrants in the midst of the pandemic. Health information and health care provisions are ideally given in migrant languages and, if not possible, governments must devise ways to reach out to migrants whose languages are not particularly represented in the service they provide. And these health provisions must definitely include care of the mental well-being of migrants, again, ideally, in their native languages, too. Racist attitudes, actions, and language should not proliferate and the government and the society as a whole are morally obligated to ensure that such do not happen and endanger migrants. Most importantly, I outlined a crisis and emergency language competence and plan for migrants as a response to the issues I raised in this article.

Elsewhere, I proposed that a sub-field in linguistics be established and be called ‘migration linguistics’, which involves an interdisciplinary and multidimensional study of the various aspects of language in the context of human mobility (Borlongan, 2019, 2022). I am of the opinion that, in having to deal with language use relating to migrants, while remaining primarily a linguistic matter, perspectives from various disciplines should be included because language in the context of migration is, like migration itself, is dynamic and multi-faceted. As is the case of language issues of migrants in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as I made obvious in this article, insights from linguistics are not enough. There is a need to make medical, psychological, sociological, political, cultural, and legal inquiries to arrive at better answers to the many questions we have. Clearly, a pandemic like that of the COVID-19 is a medical concern. As health issues may arise among the general public, psychological distress may emanate from it. But prior to the pandemic, the society already has pre-set notions of racism and discrimination, which may already have even been institutionalized, and then magnified by the current health crisis. Certain political and legal actions have been the cause and consequences of this reaction to the pandemic. In all of these, language cuts across both as a problem and a solution, as a bridge and as a wall. Hence, migration linguistics might be able to attempt to provide some answers to the many questions we have regarding language in the migration process. And while ‘migration linguistics’ might be a newly-coined term, the study of language in the context of migration is not really new (cf. Canagarajah, 2017; Piller, 2016). It is hoped that more work could be done within the framework of migration linguistics so as not only to advance linguistics and its allied fields but also to likewise provide a more theory and research-informed yet clear and practical solutions for the language problems experienced by migrants. Migration linguistics covers both the linguistic and sociological dimensions of language in the context of migration (Borlongan, 2019, 2022). Thus, it includes the study of linguistic structure and the sociology of language. Sociolinguistics makes the distinction between microsociolinguistics/sociolinguistics of language/variationist sociolinguistics and macrosociolinguistics/sociolinguistics of society/sociology of language (cf. Coulmas, 1997), the former focusing more on structure and the latter on sociology. This contribution to migration linguistics is on the sociological dimensions of language in the context of migration in light of the ongoing pandemic.

In closing, the overarching argument this article wishes to underscore is not really new and it has been said many times over but is particularly important to say it once again now given the current pandemic: Language is very crucial and important in the whole migration process, and

most especially in matters when public health in general and the health and welfare of migrants in particular are involved. Quite poignantly, Francis (2020) recently released an encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship titled *Fratelli Tutti*. In his letter which is yet the most forthright on migration issues, he invites Christians to ponder on the inequality migrants experience though his call might be addressed to people generally nonetheless, and so his words are quoted as an end to this article on language issues of migrants in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. Hence, they ought to be “agents in their own redemption”. No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable, since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love. (section 39)

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