

COVID-19 Myth Busters in World Languages:
A case for broader impacts of linguistic research during the COVID-19 crisis¹

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Abstract: The call for papers of this special issue raises the question of whether we can make “use of linguistic expertise to address problems connected to the COVID-19 crisis.” In answer to this question, this short paper reports on our ongoing multi-lingual initiative, “COVID-19 Myth Busters in World Language,” in which we translate the list of myth busters related to COVID-19 issued by WHO into as many languages as possible, including a number of minority languages. This initiative has the potential to lessen the further spread of the current COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to function as a preventive measure for a future pandemic. While translation may not be a core task of linguistic research, we submit that this initiative provides an opportunity for linguists to “pay back” many language communities, who have been providing valuable data for decades for the development of linguistic theory.

Some of us from time to time wonder whether—and how—our research on linguistics can or should have impacts that go beyond our research community. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has, in fact, started emphasising the importance of “broader impacts” of linguistic research. To the extent that our research is partly supported by tax money directly or indirectly, perhaps linguists should at least make an effort to contribute to the welfare of society. The concept of “contributing to the welfare of society” itself may be hard to define, and different scholars have different ways to approach this question; however, in the present context, it suffices to ask ourselves, “can linguistic research make this world a better/safer place to live”? These questions were made more pressing than ever to us during the COVID-19 era; it is a good time to ask ourselves why we are doing what we are doing in the face of the crisis that the whole world is suffering from. To put this question in a more concrete term, as listed as one of the topics in the call for this thematic issue of *Linguistic Vanguard*, can we make “use of linguistic expertise to address problems connected to the COVID-19 crisis”? We submit that we can. We illustrate this by reporting our ongoing case study, “COVID-19 Myth Busters in World Languages,” which instantiates a clear answer to this question.

¹ Many people have offered indispensable help for the development of this project. Since the list is too long to be contained in a footnote, we provide it as a supplementary material file. All the links to websites in the paper were last accessed and checked in June 2020.

This project is a multi-lingual, collaborative initiative to translate the list of myth busters related to COVID-19 issued by WHO² into as many languages as possible, including a number of minority languages. These translations are all made available in one place on the main project website (<https://covid-no-mb.org>), and there is an accompanying twitter account (<https://twitter.com/CovidNoMB>). The importance of this initiative lies in the fact that speakers of some of these languages do not have easy access to the information written in English. Nevertheless, in order to minimize the spread of the current pandemic to the extent possible, it is critical that accurate information related to COVID-19 be conveyed to the speakers of many languages in an accessible manner in their native languages. In the face of the current global pandemic, such information should ideally be translated into all languages that are currently spoken on the planet; realistically, it should be done for as many languages as possible.

More generally speaking, information regarding public health—e.g. how to wash hands and how not to sneeze—is often yet to be translated into their community languages in a manner that is accessible to many speakers of minority languages. The spread of COVID-19 has quickly inspired various groups of people to address this problem. As soon as it became clear that COVID-19 was a global situation, various projects sprung up to inform the public. Translations Commons provided a web-based template that can be used to create a poster with 5 points that are basic for keeping COVID-19 at bay: “Wash your hands,” “Cough in your elbow,” “Don't touch your face,” “Keep distance,” and “Stay home.”³ The project virALLanguages shares videos explaining COVID-19 in languages from Cameroon.⁴ Making available such general information related to public health issues in their respective native language not only has the potential to contribute to minimize the further spread of COVID-19, but may also function as a preventive measure for a future pandemic which may happen again.

Viewed from another general perspective, translating myth busters addresses one of the gaps in information sharing. Governments and organizations as well as projects mentioned above have been translating basic information about COVID-19 and prevention methods against COVID-19. The Endangered Languages Project⁵ serves as a clearing house for multilingual information. Parenting methods recommended by WHO have also been translated by volunteers and organized by a team of Oxford researchers.⁶ There is a non-profit group which has been translating public health related information in languages spoken in Guatemala with the slogan, “everyone—no matter where they were born or what language they speak—should

² The original text is available from the following website (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>).

³ <https://translationcommons.org/covid19multilingual/>

⁴ <http://virallanguages.org/>

⁵ <https://endangeredlanguagesproject.github.io/COVID-19/>

⁶ <https://www.covid19parenting.com/>

have the highest quality health care.”⁷ Myths related to COVID-19 were not part of the official narratives even though these myths may promote behaviors that would result in the spreading of the virus. In the era of unavoidable presence of fake news, it was timely to make an accurate information available for speakers of underresourced languages. The importance of our initiative has already been recognized by some media, the list of which appears in the Appendix.

Some examples of the myths discussed by WHO are provided in (1):

(1) Some examples of the myths related to COVID-19 issued by WHO

1. Exposing yourself to the sun or to temperatures higher than 25C degrees DOES NOT prevent the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).
2. You can recover from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Catching the new coronavirus DOES NOT mean you will have it for life.
3. Being able to hold your breath for 10 seconds or more without coughing or feeling discomfort DOES NOT mean you are free from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) or any other lung disease.

We are constantly expanding our coverage; as of June 2020, the list includes 72 languages, most of which are shown in (2). Translation into many other languages is currently ongoing. Since the comprehensive list of the languages covered is constantly updated, we would like to direct the interested readers to the main website for the most updated coverage.

(2) Languages that have been translated as of June 2020 (non-exhaustive)

Acehnese, Angami, Arabic, Aragonés, Assamese, Asturiano, Bamum - Şûpãmòm, Basaá, Bengali, Bodo, Burmese, Catalan, Chinese simplified, Chinese traditional, Drenjongke (Bhutia), Dutch, Dzongkha, English, Ewe, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Gurenɛ, Hausa, Hungarian, Indonesian, Iraqw, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, Italian, Japanese, Japanese Sign Language, Jinghpaw, Kam, Kiribati, Korean, Kurdish (Sorani), Lepcha, Likpakpaln, Low German Plattdüütsch , Malay, Malayalam, Mapudungun, Meeteilon, Mizo, Nepali, Northern Sotho, Norwegian, Nuosu Yi, Português Brasileiro, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Sesotho, Shona, Siswati, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tshiluba, Tshivenda, Twi, Uzbek O'zbekcha, Vietnamese, White Hmong, Xitsonga, Yoruba

⁷ <http://www.wuqukawoq.org>


We deploy a simple web interface, making use of colors and pictures to maximize the intelligibility and accessibility of the translations. Pictograms are added to draw attention to the information in the text. The web interface presents images that can be downloaded for sharing. Those who prefer a pdf file of all the images can also download the pdf. A sample from the translation in Drenjongke (Bhutia, Sikkim/India) is provided in (3). The pink text is a translation of the title “Breaking myths regarding the coronavirus (adopted from WHO).” Numbers correspond to each myth, and the name of the language is written vertically on each image.

(3) A sample illustration from the Drenjongke translation

Drenjongke

ཏོག་དབྱིབས་ བཤམ་ དང་ འབྲེལ་བའི་ དགོག་གཏམ་ཚུའི་
 གསལ་བཤད། ། རྒྱལ་ཡོངས་ འཕྲོད་བསྟེན་ ཟུ་ཚོགས་ལས་
 བྱུང་བའི་ བཤམ་ ཡོད་པོ་ ལྟར་ །

1. ཀྱི ཉིམ་ གསོ་སྦྱི་ ཡང་ན་ ཉིམ་འེ་ནང་ ལྷམ་ཟྱི་ དང་ འདི་ལས་
 ཚོ་དོད་ འཇལ་ཚད་ ལྷག་གོ་གིས་ བཤམ་འདི་
 བཀག་སྡོམ་ དང་ མེད་པོ་ བཏང་ མི་ཚུགས།



For some languages, audio versions of these myth busters are available since members of some speech communities are not used to seeing their own language in the written form. Some languages have their own script (Lepcha or Nuosu Yi), but the script is not always widely read. The audios, available on Youtube, have been popular with languages such as Angami (Nagaland, India) and Bodo (Assam, India).

Those who wish to contribute to expanding our coverage by translating the instructions into a new language can simply fill out a Google doc form. These forms are available in English, French and Spanish. We hope that this paper itself encourages some readers to help expand the current coverage.

(4) The link to the submission form

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSergLVY0AEnlBjylXFrZ6y9c1aa_SDmIJVPZk-efk9dpMtE4ag/viewform

This project has been met with some specific challenges as well. First of all, translating some technical terms (the term COVID-19 itself, UV lamps, thermometer) turned out to be difficult for some of these languages. In these cases, translators use multiple strategies; they simply used the English words, they transliterated the English words into their language and then added an explanation, or they used terminology that is as close as possible to their own language.

Setting up images with scripts that are not universally supported by all programs presented another set of challenges, and we addressed them by creating a pdf document using a guide image that allowed us to adjust the font size and margins of texts. The designer (the second author) then used images taken from the pdf file for the shareable images. There are languages for which there are no scripts which are widely readable by speakers; e.g. Lepcha and Drenjongke (Bhutia). There are even languages which do not possess an orthography system, in which case we are encouraging them to submit sound files.

For the Japanese sign language, we exclusively make use of videos, which can be viewed on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeM70iqRsOo>). The preparation of the materials faced some challenges as well. The amount of available information was considerably less for sign languages than other spoken languages, and new medical-related terms needed to be translated. To enhance the visibility and intelligibility, additional images were created to highlight visual cues in the presentation. The list of myths was rearranged so as to make it easier for signers to handle multiple topics. The result of these efforts can be considered to be a success: the video has been viewed more than 3,000 times on Youtube, as of June 2020, within three weeks after it was first made publicly available.

The myths were translated by volunteers who were genuinely interested in seeing their language in the list. When the project began with a few number of colleagues, we did not expect to have a long list of languages. Currently, a wide range of languages from India is being added to the list. The introduction to multiple languages by Lt. Dr P Sreekumar was essential in receiving the translations. At the moment, about 20 languages from central and southern India are being translated.

Translation may not be the core of linguistic research, but the linguistics research community as a whole shows outstanding varieties in terms of researchers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, this project has been supported by a number of professional linguists, whose names can be found on the project website.⁸ Moreover, we have connections to

⁸ For the limitation of machine translation in this context, see the Wired article here (<https://www.wired.com/story/covid-language-translation-problem>), although their demonstration is admittedly informal.

speakers of communities with a diverse range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, who have offered much needed help for this project (list as a token of appreciation is made available as a supplementary material for this paper). Speakers of minority languages have long been providing us with important data for the development of linguistic theories; we believe that not enough effort has been made to “pay them back.” We submit that this is an excellent opportunity to do so.

Appendix: The media coverage

The Tokyo Newspaper “Reaching out to speakers of minority languages” (2020/05/01).
<https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/amp/article/16968>

[A scanned article is available as a supplementary material (to be provided if accepted).]

A Wired article “Covid-19 Is History’s Biggest Translation Challenge”:
<https://www.wired.com/story/covid-language-translation-problem/>

A Korean article “A designer who faced the COVID-19 challenge”:
http://www.dnmd.com/html/dh/magazine01_view?idx=537&mode=lastest

Research activities related to COVID-19 at X University:
<https://www.research.keio.ac.jp/external/pr/covid-19.html>

Multilingual portal site for Olympic 2021:
<https://www.2020games.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/multilingual/examples/index.html>