

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract. *It seems that in the last few years the crises in Europe are at the order of the day, on each country's agenda. From an economic crisis to a sanitary crisis and lately a security crisis, the European Union has to face different challenges. Communication in this period is very important in order to keep us safe and to be protected. During the Covid-19 pandemic European Union faced different linguistic challenges (Piller, 2020; Civico, 2021) that caused misinformation or lack of information among the people. As Marco Civico observes, "People with limited knowledge of the local dominant language may be excluded from information campaigns about measures to contain the spread of Coronavirus and vaccines." (Civico, 2021:2)*

Linguistic diversity and multilingual communication in European Union is a reality, being one of its main objectives. However, the multilingualism is challenging (Czyzewska, 2014) and one of the most important limitations in communication that came with the Covid-19 pandemic is the devaluation of minority and regional languages and the rise of English-centered multilingualism in the communication (Crnic-Grotic, 2020).

Our paper will be structured in two main parts. In the first part we will discuss about the difficulties and challenges of multilingualism in European Union nowadays and we will focus on the multilingual communication during emergency situations (Civico, 2021). In the second part we will review the strategies adopted by European Union regarding the multilingualism during the Covid-19 pandemic and we will try to analyze how minority and regional languages were impacted by them. In both situations we will base our research on the official websites of the institutions of the European Union and on studies or articles already written by other researchers and scholars. On the basis of the findings of this review, we will propose a number of conclusions about the causes and consequences of the difficulties related to multilingualism in emergency situations.

According to Ingrid Piller, Jie Zhang and Jia Li (Piller & all, 2020:503), Covid-19 crisis is a great lesson for us to open a space for intercultural dialogue and to better integrate the multilingualism in communication.

Keywords: *linguistic challenge, communication in EU, multilingualism, communication in crisis, communication during covid-19*

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The Covid 19 pandemic has brought with it many language challenges for the European Union. This difficult period has imposed restrictions and changes in the way people communicate, especially in the area of public health and safety. In the context of a global health crisis, the EU has had to address issues related to the translation and interpretation of information related to Covid 19 into a multitude of official languages of the Member States. This approach has been crucial to ensure effective and coherent communication across the European Union.

One of the EU's main objectives during the pandemic was to provide accurate, up-to-date and understandable information, regardless of the language they speak. This required close coordination between the European institutions and Member States on the translation and interpretation of Covid-19 related communications. For example, the European Commission quickly developed a dedicated web portal where pandemic-related information and recommendations were published and translated into all official languages of the European Union. This involved a considerable effort in terms of human and technological resources.

In this paper we will try to make a short review of the multilingualism policies of the European Union nowadays by focusing on the multilingual communication during the emergency situations. In the second part of the article we will move our focus on the strategies adopted by the European Union and the member states and we will analyze them. At the same time, we will examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the regional and minority languages. Our research is based on the official websites of the European Union, on studies and articles already written regarding the aspect that we investigate. For conclude we will stress the main aspects regarding the linguistic challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic in European Union.

1. Multilingualism in the European Union over the time and the challenges of the policy in the European Union

The multilingualism was a policy of the European Union that existed since its creation, but more visible since the adhesion of the countries from the former communist area, in 2004. Always had an important and decisive role, even if during the time was moved in different portfolios. The maximum recognition of the policy was in 2007 when the Multilingualism represented a portfolio *per se* in the European Union, portfolio that was attributed to the Romanian commissioner Leonard Orban and lasted for 3 years, between 2007 and 2010. Later, the policy was part of the Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth portfolio and attributed to the Cypriot commissioner Androulla Vassiliou from 2010 to 2014 (Dendrinis, 2018:14). Since then the Multilingualism didn't from part of any other portfolio and it was on this time that the Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism, launched in 2009 by the European Commission stopped being financially supported and receiving mandates (Dendrinis, 2018:15). This decision led to the creation of an autonomous NGO, called European Civil Society for Multilingualism (ECSPM), which is living up to its mission and growing with the inclusion of academic institutions (European Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism, 2018). The Multilingualism continued to be a policy of the European Union, but maybe not so visible.

While the commissioner Orban was leading the Multilingualism portfolio, the appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity in European Union was presented as a priority for Europe. In a speech from 2009 he said that "We should use this diversity to

Europe's advantage. A culture of multilingualism promotes a culture of openness and tolerance. These are crucial values not only for Europe, but for the entire world. Any realistic international vision for the future of our world has to be founded on acceptance and appreciation of different cultures – and languages are at the heart of any culture. In the Commission's strategy on multilingualism I emphasize that multilingualism can play a key role in intercultural dialogue, in creating more cohesive and more sustainable societies" (Orban, 2009). At that time, the Multilingualism was seen as an asset for Europe and a shared commitment.

Some years later, the approach toward Multilingualism was a bit changed. By 2012, when the European Commission recommended "Rethinking Education: investing in Skills for Better Socio-Economic Outcomes", the conclusions regarding multilingualism and languages were articulated more instrumental, utilitarian. The European Council recognized that "linguistic diversity is a fundamental component of European culture and intercultural dialogue", but also "a good command of foreign languages is a key competence essential to make one's way in the modern world and labour market" (Council of Europe, 2011:4).

The European Union's policy regarding the multilingualism has always had three important aims: the protection of Europe's rich linguistic diversity, the protection of languages and to give citizens access to European Union's legislation in their own language. All the decisions taken regarding the multilingualism had to do with these aims. Since 2014 the Multilingualism was more present in different types of projects like "European Language Resource Coordination: supporting Multilingualism in Europe", which is an interesting network developed to manage, maintain and coordinate relevant language resources in all official languages of the European Union, but especially public service documents (European Commission, 2017). Supporting multilingualism from the point of view of language learning had several projects also. One of them is the Erasmus + Programme for Education and its objectives to include the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity. In supporting mobility, which offers students and working adults the opportunity to experience different socio-cultural realities in education and work, it provides help via Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support (OLS) to programme participants to learn and assess themselves in the language of the host country (European Commission, 2020). Other types of projects regarding the multilingualism are also present and other initiatives took place. We have mentioned just a few of them, the scope of this article not being the enumeration of all the European projects regarding the Multilingualism, but to see the change of the vision in the European Union regarding this policy.

One interesting initiative is the European Day of languages, celebrated every year on 26th of September, when all sorts of events that promote language learning in the European Union take place, including the European Language Label, that is an award by the Commission designed to encourage new initiatives in language teaching and learning, to reward new language teaching methods and to raise awareness of regional and minority languages (Dendrinos, 2018:17).

Another important collaborator of the European Commission since 2014 is the European Center for Modern Languages (ECML) with its headquarter in Graz, Austria. The mission of the ECML is to encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching and support its member states in the implementation of effective language education policies. The Modern language Division of the Council of Europe is

responsible for the production of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (Council of Europe).

Summarizing and viewing the evolution of the Multilingualism over the time, we arrive at the conclusion of the European Parliament that “Multilingualism is the language of the European Union” (European Parliament, 2022). Despite this, the Multilingualism has its own challenges, obvious because the European societies are facing rapid change due to the technological advances, globalisation, but also ageing population.

Looking at the Multilingualism policy from the economic point of view it seems that implementing the policy is firstly very expensive. Just for the translations in the EU, the total cost of translation and interpretation in all the EU institutions is around 1 billion Euro per year (1% of the EU budget or just over 2 Euro per citizen) (Czyzewska, 2014:91, European Parliament, 2022:7). Spending around 2 euros per year in order to ensure that all the citizens have access to the legislation of the EU in their language seems good value for the money. However, the average cost across the EU is not necessarily the indicative figure to take into consideration, as the number of people speaking EU official languages differs substantially.

Another challenge for the Multilingualism is the fact that implementing a multilingual policy in the EU also takes time (Czyzewska, 2014:93). Translation of official documents into all official languages can take several months which results in delays in the adoption of EU documents. The problem of translation delays has been observed especially in the period of the largest enlargement of the EU when the number of official languages increased. The third challenge regarding the Multilingualism policy is also the fact that the EU is also connected with the future accession of new EU Member States. Countries as Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or Turkey will widen the number of EU official languages. Accession of new EU Member States will thus result in an increase of translation and interpretation costs of the EU institutions in order to respect the principle of the linguistic diversity in the European Union.

In conclusion, it's essential for the EU to encourage all the citizens to be multilingual and to keep with the objective of multilingualism in the UE to know two foreign languages apart the mother tongue, even if this objective is an old one and may seem obsolete.

2. Strategies adopted in Europe regarding the multilingualism during the Covid-19 pandemic

We should start this part of our study by saying that the strategies that we will present do not represent an exhaustive examination of the situation during the covid-19 pandemic. This part of the study is based on information found on papers already published regarding the situation of multilingualism in the pandemic. On the other part, it is possible to not have seen everything is published until now regarding our topic. Anyway, the scope of our paper is to show how multilingual communication is made at the level of the Europe in crisis situation and the reaction of the European Union.

The covid-19 pandemic took many governments by surprise and forced them to take decisions that have been neglected during the time regarding the communication in urgent situations. The pandemic demonstrated that the multilingual communication is important in order to be everybody informed and not to create panic, misunderstanding

or suppositions. The lack of an adequate “inclusive multilingual communication” (Civico, 2021:2) in emergency situations can lead to severe inequalities.

As strategies adopted by the European Union regarding the multilingualism, we can mention a few. First of all, it was created the institutional website of the European Commission with information about covid-19 in all 24 official languages of the European Union, even if in the early days of the pandemic the Commission published an official document on the disease in English only (translations were published in the following days and weeks, but the fact that these documents were initially available exclusively in a language that, at the moment of publishing, was the native language of roughly 2% of the EU population and spoken fluently by another 10% is quite telling of the attention to multilingualism in emergency situations) (Civico, 2021:10). But, even if the European Commission published the translations in a few days, the regional languages were excluded and also the languages of the migrant populations. Another interesting aspect was that a member of the European Parliament, Andor Deli, addressed a parliamentary question to the Commission on April 21, 2020 on the subject “Difficult challenges faced by minority language media outlets during the pandemic.” In particular, the question concerned the consequences suffered by the already struggling minority language media, with particular reference to national minority languages. Noting that media outlets are crucial for the maintenance and promotion of minority languages, he argues that the current funding from the EU is not enough to support the industry in this critical moment. Furthermore, the Commission said that it will continue co-funding specific internship opportunities in minority language media with a budget of 700,000 euros (European Commission, 2021).

In general, there were some countries that cared more about the multilingual communication during the pandemic, for example the Portuguese Government published some leaflets in 15 languages of some migrant communities and also the Belgian Government published online information about corona virus in 29 languages of migrants living in Belgium (Civico, 2021:10). On the other side, the Ministry of Healthcare of Slovakia was skeptic regarding the vaccination campaign and disregard the ethnic minorities (Civico, 2021:11). In general, the lack of information in languages other than the country’s official language(s) was noted to not only cause a non-homogeneous spread of information, but also to pass on the idea that minority languages are less important than the official ones (Crnić-Grotić, 2020).

The international body tasked with coordinating the global response, the World Health Organization (WHO), makes information available in the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish) and three additional languages (German, Hindi, Portuguese) although in practice English predominates, as it is the language of press conferences. World Health Organization information is primarily directed at member states, which are then tasked with localizing relevant information for their populations through their national health authorities. This means that states have been key actors – including information providers – in this crisis. Most of the world’s states operate in one or two national languages only, and linguistic minorities within those states – whether indigenous or migrant – face significant language barriers at the best of times. Around the world, the exclusion of linguistic minorities from fair and equitable access to social participation is something common (Piller, 2020:505).

In general, the communication between governments, organizations and citizens is made by different channels. For example, the publishing of policy documents is one of the manners in which this communication is made. Concerning the case of the covid-19 pandemic, many policies were addressed to the hospitals and other health care institutions, but also to the general public. The information addressed to the general public concerned mainly recommendations and rules of conduct to follow during the pandemic in order to limit the diffusion of the virus. In this kind of situations is important that the information be accessible and understandable to the general population and to all the subgroups that may exist. It is obvious that the information between governments and citizens do not only flow through papers, but also through others means like television, internet and press. And of course, these other means are the most common source of information for the majority of people, regardless their level of education and their language proficiency. The only common thing between these two ways of communications is the language in which the information is transmitted (Civico, 2021:6-7, Piller, 2020:505). On the other side, this information is transmitted in the majority of cases in the national language of each state. This has been contributed to the fact that the persons speaking a regional language or a minority language be vulnerable to misinformation and fake news.

Some countries of Europe have taken more interest than others in the covid-19 pandemic. For example, in Denmark, in March 2021 were organized webinars in order to discuss the situations of the ethnic minorities with respect of the covid-19 situation. Several local good practices were identified, like using young people to explain and spread accessible and multilingual information on digital platforms. Also, some NGOs took the initiative to step and provide multilingual information in minority languages. This is the situation of the NGO Danish Refugee Council, which created a website where they provided information about covid-19 in 12 different languages (Civico, 2021:11).

Finland also is a good example when we talk about the communication in different languages during the covid-19 pandemic. The Finnish institute for health and welfare formed a Multilingual and Multichannel Coronavirus Communications Task Force in collaboration with the Finnish Ministry for Social Affairs and Health. This channel is the response to the need of information in multiple languages and the objective was to offer correct and appropriate information to the persons who have migrated to Finland and need to be informed. It seems that Finland went a long way for proving multilingual information about the pandemic. They managed to produce and to translate materials in 24 different languages and to disseminate it through various channels of diffusion like television, social media or different web pages (Civico, 2021:12-13).

Another very interesting and good news was the fact that the Deaf community received a lot of attention during the covid-19 pandemic. Antonio Guterres, the United Nation Secretary General, expressed his feeling of inclusion for these people, saying that this is the opportunity to implement more inclusive and accessible societies (Civico, 2021:14). In order to do this, during the pandemic, it was very important that the information be spread also in sign language. However, this was difficult in some situations, as there are deaf people using the lip-reading when communicating with other persons. It's not the case for all deaf persons, but they exist. In this situation, the obligation to wear a mask made impossible the communication with many deaf individuals. So, the recommendations for this category of persons were, on one side that the hospitals to rely, if possible, on sign language interpreters specialized on medical

communication, but also the use of transparent masks, in communication with deaf persons. Also, it was recommended the use of an application on phones that converts the speech to text in order that the medical staff could use it and could transmit their information to the patients. In addition to these measures, it was recommendable also that the information made available in text format in public spaces to be accompanied by a QR code that gives access to the same information in the national sign language (Civico, 2021:14).

3. Causes and consequences of the difficulties related to communication in emergency situations in the European Union

The communication during emergency situations is something that outbreak with the covid-19 pandemic. They are not some many publications dating before 2020 (Civico, 2021:3) and presenting communication in this type of situations. In this sense, the journal *Multilingua* published a special issue (volume 39, issue 5) titled “Linguistic diversity in a time of crisis: Language challenges of the covid-19 pandemic” and dedicated all the articles for this type of situations. One thing that call out our attention is the fact that one of the authors, Li, (2020) even calls for the establishment of a specific subdiscipline of linguistics, which she names “emergency linguistics”, that should focus on the contributions of linguistics during emergency situations, while Teng (2020) includes emergency language services within the larger category of the national emergency management system (Multilingua, 2020).

Moreover, and maybe totally understandable in the context of a pandemic situation, most of the studies even regarding communication were published in medical journals, rather than in social sciences journals, and authored by medical doctors rather than by linguists or social sciences experts (Civico, 2021:3), thing that its somehow logical, because the emergency was related to the medical sector and the first reactions were in that sector. In their study, Knuesel et all (2020) mention the fact that it’s not justified the fact the institutions were caught unprepared for covid-19 from the point of view of communication and this fact was highlighted in other occasions too, not just in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. As an idea to improve the communication in this specific type of situation, Knuesel et all (2020) suggest that health care institutions could value more the skills of multilingual doctors and medical staff, able to attend patients in their language in a competent way. Communicating with the patients in their own language leads to a better understanding of the treatment, of the patient condition and a better confidence of the patient in the medical staff. In his article from 2021 dedicated to the barriers in communication during covid-19, Marco Civico even presents some studies that demonstrate the fact that being treated in your own language improves the medical act and the response to the patients to it.

Limited access to interpretation and translation services has always had a significant impact on people who are not native speakers of the local language or who are deaf or hard of hearing. This has been especially true during the pandemic. Language barriers are one of the most substantial problems of restricted interpretation and translation services. It can be difficult for non-native speakers of the local language to understand crucial information about the virus, preventive measures, medical instructions, and governmental regulations. As a result, people can find it challenging to seek medical care, adhere to safety guidelines or decide what is best for them during the pandemic. It's critical for people and healthcare professionals to communicate clearly,

especially in times of health emergency. But the absence of adequate interpretation and translation services makes it difficult for medical staff to comprehend patients' symptoms, medical histories or concerns. This lack of communication can result in incorrect diagnoses, unsuitable treatments, or a deterioration of patient-provider trust, all of which compromise the standard of care. Multicultural communities were the most affected during the pandemic by linguistic challenges. As seen before a lack of translating or interpreting services and the virtual communication issues led to miscommunication. These people not only struggled to understand the basic information and guidelines and took longer to adapt to the virtual reality created by the pandemic, but they also had issues in accessing healthcare and other essential services.

It is somehow interesting the manner in which Pillar and all (2020) counts the number of languages in the world. Making a small experiment regarding the languages on Wikipedia, they argue that global public communication is conducted through a small number of languages, between which the English language is the second most frequently used. The conclusion is that the global knowledge dissemination is limited to a small number of languages, and this was the case also when the covid-19 pandemic has started (Pillar, 2020:504). Or, the communication in critical situations concerns the languages needs of migrant populations, especially for the population settled on a territory. Covid-19 was an example that the communication is challenging, but covid-19 was only a trigger, because there can exist other emergency situations and we have to be prepared. These kinds of situations are not only health care crises, but it can be wars, earthquakes, floods or others. Actually, Marco Civico observes in his paper "Covid-19 and language barriers" that "People with limited knowledge of the local dominant language may be excluded from information campaigns about measures to contain the spread of Coronavirus and vaccines" (Civico: 2021:2).

On the other part, the states are not the only actors in our world and the information that circulates emanate from a wide variety of social actors, from media corporations to political parties or other kind of groups. Some of them are specifically dedicated to make public health information available in languages insufficiently served by state actors. Others have contributed to a so called infodemic, where the persons who don't have access to high-quality information were permanently exposed to misleading information. Actually, we can speak about a combination of language barriers, on one hand and low levels of trust in official communications on the other hand. These have made the minority populations vulnerable to misinformation and fake news regarding the covid-19 pandemic (Pillar at all, 2020:505).

The corona virus pandemic was not only a health crisis, but also a political and even spiritual one (Pillar at all, 2020:509). In that time, for a human being, not being able to gather with another person or to hug a friend was something disturbing. Many persons have found themselves separated from the loved ones during the pandemic, not only because of the quarantine, but also because of the travel restrictions that kept families apart. This entire means that the language challenges of covid-19 do not only relate to the dissemination of information, but also to relationship building. Emergency communication is also about establishing and providing comfort (Pillar at all, 2020:510).

In order to conclude we would like to assume the affirmation of Pillar et all that mentions the fact that the covid-19 has thrown the role of English as global lingua franca even more than before. But, beyond that, they envisage a paradigm shift in sociolinguistics on the horizon. First of all, the sociolinguistic would need to include

local and indigenous knowledge in communication in order to avoid an English-centered monolingual mindset. Secondly, the sociolinguistic as discipline, should be more adapted to our times, more adept of dealing with multi-directionality and complexity; and thirdly, the sociolinguistics needs to establish a clear dialogue with policy makers and activists (Piller at all, 2020: 512).

In conclusion, it's more than clear that the multilingualism during emergency situations is very important. In future, the development of increasingly accurate translation-enabling technologies is going to be crucial in the management of multilingualism during emergency crises. The communication with minority populations or migrant population during a crisis should be done in their language. However, this practice proves way more ineffective when the linguistic background of the population changes significantly.

On the other hand, it is true that sometimes the language-related problems are not only language-related and it should be better to have some cultural training too. Mikolič Južnič and Pokorn (2021) discuss the difference between “intercultural mediators” and “community interpreters”, who are, respectively, more focused on the cultural aspects and the purely linguistic tasks. Both figures play a vital role in emergency contexts.

The language challenges during the covid-19 pandemic have reiterated the importance of languages and translation in the European context. Steps have been taken to strengthen and improve language capacities, thereby promoting effective and inclusive communication throughout the European Union. It is important to continue investing and to make efforts in developing and strengthening language capacities in the European Union in order to overcome future challenges and ensure access to relevant information and clear understanding for all citizens, regardless of language. By addressing and solving these language challenges, the European Union demonstrates its commitment to linguistic diversity, effective communication and solidarity among Member States.

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