



#DiscoverTranslation

Translation – helping in crisis situations

When an international crisis hits, help must arrive fast – and this often requires coordination and information flows between people who don't speak the same language. People need vital knowledge they can understand instantly.

Seen this way, translation can help save lives. Think of the aftermath of Hurricane Idai in Mozambique in 2019, when it would have been impossible to help victims without the help of translators and interpreters, who translated humanitarian documents for aid organisations and helped aid workers communicate with survivors of this catastrophe.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown how essential it is for people to have access to information in a language and format that they understand. The pandemic is a global challenge that, beyond the local healthcare response, requires a global – and so multilingual – approach.

The search for a vaccine is also a global one, involving scientists all over the world. But before any vaccine can be sold on the market, it has to be tested in clinical trials, which usually involve thousands of people, in multiple countries. There are many points during the process of developing new drugs where language services are indispensable, for example:

- development and trials involve lots of documentation, such as clinical trial results
- transcription and voice-over services are commonly required for focus groups and hearings
- documents needing approval by the pharmaceutical authorities also have to be translated carefully.

What's more, scientists and policy makers have had to agree, quickly, on a whole new range of terminology for COVID-19, and then have it translated into as many languages as necessary. Take 'social distancing' – in itself, not too difficult to translate, but it means different things in different countries (e.g. 1.5 m in Belgium, but 2 m in Luxembourg). Other words, like 'lockdown', have gained a new meaning since the crisis began. And how are we to treat new words such as the Italian 'contagiato sommerso'? Some languages automatically have an equivalent term. But others relied on translators and terminologists to come up with a more 'descriptive translation' (in English: 'undetected case' or 'undiagnosed, symptomatic patient').

The COVID crisis has also impacted daily interactions between businesses and their customers. Companies are reinventing their model, testing new processes, and rolling out the training needed to get staff up and running fast. For many larger firms, this means translating company-wide communications into multiple languages.

Given all this, it was fortunate that translators, used to remote working and with the necessary technology in place, were able to continue working throughout the crisis, with no serious disruptions.

Translation has also helped the cultural sector cope with the crisis: when museums had to close their doors, many organised multilingual virtual tours via their websites. And let's not forget the many millions of people able to watch movies and series on streaming services during the lockdown, many of them subtitled or dubbed.

All this to show that while translation is all around us, in a global crisis it really comes into its own.

'Translation all around us'

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A campaign to promote the translation profession to audiences outside the language industry