TRANSLATIONS IN INTENSIVE CARE

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Abstract

During the two-year pandemic, translators, interpreters and terminologists had a difficult mission, as they had to keep up with all the changes at the lexical level and, at the same time, to cope with a huge workload and with the physical and psychological pressure imposed by such a crisis. Scientific papers, medical letters, clinical trial reports, technical manuals and reviews of medical literature had to be translated in record time, whereas patients' dialogues with foreign doctors, international conference speeches and television shows required the presence of medical interpreters. The purpose of this article is to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic from the viewpoint of translation, interpretation and terminology and to analyse the emotional context behind the actual communication. The main research directions are the phenomenon of infodemic, with its consequences on re-shaping communication, the impact of the pandemic on terminology and the new tendencies in medical translation and interpretation, implying the use of machine translation and infographics. The theoretical framework has been provided by some Chinese psycholinguists, J. Xu, C. Liu and X. Luo, who analysed the effects of the pandemic at the linguistic level, and by a famous Romanian linguist, R. Zafiu, who emphasized the changes that the pandemic brought to our language. The results of my research have shown that people from various countries adapted to the crisis not only from the medical or social viewpoint, but also from the linguistic perspective, taking "intensive care" of the message they transmitted on social networks, in mass media or in translated texts.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a huge challenge not only from the medical point of view, but also from the linguistic one, since all the avalanche of information released every day by a wide range of media had to be rendered in various languages, which implied a great deal of pressure on translators, interpreters and terminologists (Chaillou, Van Der Kallen, 2021). Between the 11th of March 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared the state of COVID-19 pandemic, and the 15th of March 2022, when many governments allowed a relaxation of physical distancing restrictions and many people started to speak about a post-pandemic era, mankind had to deal with a lot of unprecedented challenges: worldwide medical emergency state, lockdown, medical crisis, a race against time to create an efficient vaccine or treatment and, above all, an inflation of contradictory information – or an "infodemic". All these implied a close cooperation between the medical staff, researchers and authorities on the one hand, and translators, terminologists and interpreters on the other hand. The avalanche of information – which people were craving for – needed to be transmitted

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in a variety of languages, so that it could reach even the remotest corner of the world. Not only the message as such was important, but also its emotional value, which had to be properly conveyed, in order to avoid mass panic and irresponsible gestures.

The title of this article has a double meaning which aims at covering the two realities: medical translators and interpreters were needed more than ever in hospitals, including in the intensive care units filled with patients in a critical condition, and they also needed the others' care and empathy, since they were dealing with a both dangerous and emotional situation, in which they were exposed to the risk of catching the disease and to the psychological trauma of seeing people dying around them. This bi-directional "care" was translated into long hours spent in hospitals, in teams of medical experts, scientists and interpreters, and into a joint effort to do everyone's best to get out of the crisis as quickly as possible. The co-operation between the medical staff, authorities and mass media representatives was extremely intense and required expert communication skills, including translation and interpretation abilities. This two-year period abounded in online meetings and conferences that needed remote interpreting, which became very popular.

The main types of texts written during the COVID-19 pandemic were scientific papers, research reports, medical letters, clinical trial reports, user guides of medical equipment and medical literature reviews. Many of these, containing crucial information for the patients, doctors or pharmaceutical companies, had to be translated in a record amount of time; consequently, the medical translators and interpreters had to be in the first line, just like the doctors and researchers.

Based on the abovementioned topics, the structure of the article will cover the parallelism between the pandemic and the infodemic caused by COVID-19, the impact of the pandemic at the terminological level, the issue of medical translation and interpretation between challenges and successes, between the risks posed by machine translations of medical documents and the importance of infographics as a means to save time, costs and efforts in the race against time to provide accurate information and recommendations to a worldwide audience.

2. Pandemic and infodemic

Information "was a double-edged sword during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, effective communication of facts helped people to obtain adequate risk perceptions and make adaptive health behavior" (Xu and Liu, 2021, 3), while, on the other hand, the excess of information and the lack of control over the news released in the media prevented efficient crisis management. The studies analyzed by the two Chinese researchers, Jian Xu and Cong Liu, have emphasized the idea that people exposed to a huge amount of negative information on a subject they are not familiar with, such as a pandemic, develop anxiety and other emotions that could push them to their limit, leading to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, which, in turn, could lead to severe mental illness or suicide attempts.

Although we had already known both mass media's interest in the sensational elements of news, to the detriment of truth, and people's tendency to release fake news on the internet, the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of the risks posed by misinformation and disinformation. Together with the specific problems of the pandemic as such, there were these issues related to what we now call an infodemic, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "an excessive amount of information about a problem that is typically unreliable, spreads rapidly, and makes a solution more difficult to achieve" (Infodemic, n.d.; Oxford, n.d.). Like the virus itself, rumors and fake news spread all over the world, leading to a crisis in communication. The flood of contradictory information on the symptoms of the disease, the number of people it affected, the effects of the vaccines or the general sanitary measures to be taken created a lot of confusion and distrust in the authorities and the media, which led to a genuine social panic, with negative effects on people's physical and mental health, as well as on the public health response. Doctors and authorities were often ignored, denied credibility or prevented from doing their job properly, because people, influenced by the infodemic of conspiracy theories, did not trust them anymore and thought they were doing more harm than good.

There are a lot of cases in which mass media were accused of disseminating inaccurate information and pictures taken out of context, just to create panic. Many TV channels presented images of past catastrophes and purposefully associated them with the COVID-19 pandemic. The most eloquent example of this dangerous and unethical practice of media representatives from different countries is the image of some coffins, belonging to the victims of a shipwreck off the Italian coast of Lampedusa in 2013, which was included in a documentary about the people who died of COVID-19 in Bergamo in 2020. The documentary, screened at the 2021 Venice Film Festival, is about the people who died of COVID-19, but the image of the migrants who died in the shipwreck near Lampedusa appears 46 seconds in the trailer, mixed with other images showing pandemic victims in Italy (Dejaifve, 2022), thus inducing in the viewers' minds the terrifying idea that many people who died of COVID-19 were left in coffins in empty halls because there was no room for them in the mortuaries or cemeteries.

By the 3rd of March 2020, so one week before the pandemic was officially declared by the World Health Organization, the internet had been invaded by millions of potentially harmful pieces of content, such as the recommendation to drink bleach to destroy the virus or to disinfect food products with chlorine. Therefore, the major social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, decided to remove all the dangerous or non-sensical posts, such as medically disproved claims, unchecked recommendations or urges to panic purchases of various kinds, at the risk of being accused of censorship. Furthermore, they assured the World Health Organization that, no matter where people lived, when they accessed Facebook, Twitter or Google, when they searched for 'coronavirus', 'COVID-19' or a related term, they were automatically directed to a reliable source, such as the WHO website or the websites of the local ministry of health, the public health authority or the national center for disease control (Zarocostas, 2020, 676). Other organizations, such as UNESCO, adopted a three-step strategy for combatting the infodemic: free access to Open Education Resources, networks of fact-checkers on different subjects (i.e. conspiracy theories, vaccines, side-effects of treatments, etc.) and in various languages, and the use of digital technologies for promoting a large-scale media and information literacy.

All these methods to combat the infodemic have proven to be effective in the long term and now, in 2022, we can see that the amount of fake news on this topic is insignificant. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that people tend to carefully check the information they receive from various media, without taking everything for granted and, more importantly, without panicking. One of the few positive effects of the infodemic was that, due to this bombardment of information, people were forced to learn new concepts and words and, as a result, improved their medical knowledge and vocabulary. The following part of this article is dedicated to the changes that the pandemic has brought at the terminological level, in both English and Romanian.

3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at the terminological level

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various fields of activity is probably more dramatic than we can currently realize. However, if we were asked to mention some of the most affected domains, we would probably not think about the linguistic field. And yet, it has been the subject of unprecedented changes and innovations from the terminological point of view, both intra-linguistically and inter-linguistically.

First, let us take the example of the Romanian language. Overnight, a lot of terms that were completely unknown to the Romanian general public before 2020 – or that were used with a different lexical or morphological value – became very popular: 'izoletă', 'intubat', 'SARS-COV', 'Corona Virus', 'test RT-PCR', 'test antigen', 'hidroxiclorochină', 'mască FFP2', 'screening post-COVID', 'ventilator', 'contacți', 'lockdown'. These were the most looked up terms in the Romanian online dictionaries in 2020 and 2021, which proves that people, bombarded with controversial information by the media, were trying to figure out on their own what the most frequently used terms actually meant.

Initially, the Romanian speakers could not understand the original meaning of the term 'COVID' and how it was formed; therefore, this was the most popular term during the entire pandemic. As an acronym from English (i.e. Corona Virus Disease), it was not self-evident. In an attempt to make it clearer, by means of popular etymology, or maybe trying to assign it an apotropaic semantic value, to turn away its evil influence, or, later, as part of a secret code on social networks, where the unchecked posts containing the real term were censored, the Romanians started to refer to it as 'covrig' or 'guvid'. They even turned it into a common masculine noun and created its plural form, 'covizi' (similarly to 'guvizi'), or derived its verbal counterpart in the reflexive voice, 'a se covidi/ a se covida'.

This linguistic approach to a disease is not at all new, since many medical terms have very inventive synonyms in the lay language in Romanian (e.g. 'gălbinare' for icterus, 'lingoare' for typhus fever). Actually, this tendency to create lay words to be used instead of the specialized terms started to decline only recently in the history of language, after the Second World War, when people got more familiar with medical terms, thanks to the increase in literacy and in the accessibility of the publications for popularizing science. The humorous approach to a dangerous disease, which the Romanians took by using words like 'covrig' or 'guvid' instead of COVID, is not new either. As early as the onset of the pandemic, the American president Donald Trump refused to refer to the disease as COVID-19 and used either politically incorrect synonyms for it, such as "the Chinese flu", "the China flu" or simply "the China", in order to blame the Chinese for losing control of the virus in Wuhan, or funny names, such as "kung flu" (Itkowitz, 2020).

The same tendency to use funny words to refer to a dramatic reality can be noticed in the case of the neologism 'izoletă' (i.e. the special type of stretcher used for transporting people infected with the new Coronavirus). Probably derived from the verb 'a izola', with the suffix '-etă', used for other means of transport, such as 'motocicletă', 'bicicletă' or 'motoretă', it sounds pretty strange or amusing for what it actually designates (Zafiu, 2020).

Another terminological novelty was the use of the word 'contact' as a masculine noun, with the plural form 'contacți', similar to the English form "contacts", referring to those people who got into contact with a person suffering from COVID-19 or suspected of having been infected with the virus. The plural form created over night in Romanian is not natural for the way in which our language usually assimilates neologisms, including them in the category of neutral nouns rather than assigning them to the masculine gender. Based on the similarity with the word 'contact', the verb 'a contracta' (i.e. to contract a disease) was wrongly used as 'a contacta o boală', even on the official site of the Romanian Ministry of Health, as the following example shows: "Bărbatul care a **contactat** virusul a fost transportat la București, la Institutul Național de Boli Infecțioase..." (MS, n.d.).

Even the word 'virus', which was probably the most frequent during the entire pandemic, was wrongly used in its plural form, 'viruși' (i.e. the correct plural form of the noun only when it refers to computer bugs), instead of 'virusuri' (i.e. the correct plural form of the medical term). Like in other cases (e.g. the currently recommended plural form of the word 'nivel' is both 'nivele' and 'niveluri', without any difference in meaning, although in the past 'nivele' was used about floors, whereas 'niveluri' was used about stages or levels), maybe in the future the form 'viruși' will be used in free variation with 'virusuri', as imposed by the spoken language.

In 2021, when the vaccine against COVID-19 was launched, the anti-vaxxers became very inventive from the terminological point of view and started to use various ways to refer to the vaccine itself and to the people who opted for vaccination. By using different spellings (e.g. 'vaxxine', 'vacksin' etc.) and pejorative terms like 'înțepați' or 'injectați', they tried to avoid the censorship imposed by the social networks on anti-vaccination posts.

The record of terminological change was held during the pandemic by the phrase "social distancing". It entered the common use in 2020 and was replaced by the phrase "physical distancing" only one year later. The explanations for this sudden change are numerous: euphemization, in an attempt to

show that the distance is only physical and has nothing to do with the divergence of ideas, opinions or emotions, political correctness, as a way to distinguish between temporary separation and social alienation, and etymology, since, during the Spanish flu at the beginning of the 20th century, the terms "social distancing" and "physical distancing", defined by Max C. Starkoff, an American doctor from Missouri, as the best form of slowing the pace of the pandemic, were used in free variation (Tolnai, 2020). From the medical point of view, there is no difference between the two phrases, as both refer to the same prophylactic measure, but from the social point of view there is a huge difference, since the phrase "physical distancing" has no negative connotation, being regarded simply as a preventive measure among others, whereas "social distancing" has a bad impact on the population, being regarded as a form of estrangement and manipulation that could fuel the conspiracy theories about changing the old world order and replacing it with a new one, in which humans are treated like some alienated robots depending on technology.

The speed of terminological changes during the pandemic was determined by the rapid change in the medical, social and political situation. Since most discoveries related to the virus and the possibility to slow down or stop its spreading were made by the British and American scientists, many English terms were rapidly imported by other languages. The main translation procedures used in the process of lexical loan from English into Romanian were transference ('lockdown', 'COVID'), calque ('test RT-PCR') and adaptation ('ventilator', which in Romanian meant only "fan" and did not have the meaning of a mechanical ventilation machine).

The tendency to borrow English words and, at the same time, to create new ones by internal means (such as the derivation with the suffix '-etă' in the case of 'izoletă') is not specific for the Romanian language. In Spain, an English-Spanish glossary of more than 5000 terms related to the COVID-19 pandemic was created in a record time, in order to inform the Spaniards on the actual meaning of the terms they encountered in media communication.

From the viewpoint of terminology and translation studies, the COVID-19 pandemic was a source of lexical creativity, in which many previously unknown words and phrases entered the common use and developed new forms and meanings. In medical translations, these ever-changing forms were a real challenge, but, thanks to their competence and professionalism, specialized translators managed to deal with them, as detailed in the following chapter.

4. Medical translation and interpretation between challenges and successes

As a rule, medical translators and interpreters should have solid knowledge in the field of general medicine and specialize in a few specialties, in order to do their job safely and competently. At the same time, they should show empathy towards the people they meet every day, since, in any moment, someone's life could depend on the way they do their job, because any translation mistake could have fatal consequences. Many medical translators refused to work on texts related to COVID-19 for fear they might make fatal mistakes, especially because all the information related to this virus and its mutations changed from day to day and the available medical knowledge concerning it was not perceived as very solid. In turn, medical interpreters, who used to collaborate on a regular basis with various hospitals and research institutions, withdrew from these partnerships for two main reasons, one practical and the other one emotional: some of them were afraid to get in touch with sick patients, doctors from the emergency rooms or researchers from laboratories where studies on the virus were carried out, whereas others could not see people suffering around them and wanted to detach themselves from tragic situations. Nevertheless, those who chose to stay, despite the difficulties and challenges, did an excellent job. The interpreters facilitated communication between doctors and patients or patients' families or between epidemiologists and the general public, while the specialized translators dealt with a huge number of texts on hygiene guidelines, preventive measures, vaccination, prescriptions or user guides for medical equipment. What is truly impressive is the fact that many translators, interpreters and terminologists worked pro bono, for various charitable organizations and public institutions or as freelancers, in an effort to build a bridge between people and nations in their fight against a deadly disease.

The cooperation between translators/ interpreters, doctors and patients was vital for overcoming language barriers, which could pose a risk for the communication between the medical staff and the patients, and, consequently, could threaten patients' safety. An eloquent example given by Guo et al. is that of a Korean hospitalized in China, who refused the treatment provided by the Chinese doctors because he could not understand the local language and was afraid that the foreign medical staff might harm him. With the help of an interpreter, he was reassured that the treatment was safe and the doctors really wanted to cure him, so he finally accepted the treatment and was able to return home to Korea safe and sound (Guo et al, 2020, 19-20). This case study proves once again that, in a health crisis, the role of the interpreters is not only that of mediators between languages and cultures, but also that of psychological comforters, who appease patients' fears simply by removing the language barriers.

Due to the shortage of medical translators and interpreters available on short notice or pro bono, many hospitals and other medical institutions resorted to machine translation. Although it seemed to be a cost-effective, time- and effort-saving alternative to human translation, it turned out to be extremely risky for both patients and medical staff. In other words, what was saved in terms of financial and human effort was lost in terms of safety and quality.

A study carried out by the British Medical Journal in 2014 analyzed the medical translations done by Google Translate in 26 different languages and the results were shocking: only 57% of the medical translations were accurate enough as to not put patients' life in danger. Actually, the patients' risk of dying of a certain disease was significantly lower than the risk of dying as a consequence of a faulty translation (Patil, Davies, 2014). The rhetorical question that we could ask in front of such dramatic evidence is: Should we trust a treatment that has 43% chances of failure with fatal consequences? Of course, we could argue that machine translation has significantly improved since 2014, but the sad truth is that it still lacks the necessary qualities that could make it safe and accurate enough for the medical field. As Gretchen McCulloch has shown in one of her articles dedicated to the topic of translations in the time of pandemic, even a simple phrase like "wash your hands" could put Google Translate in trouble. The translation into Japanese is too informal, like a parent's recommendation to a child, and could be perceived as offensive in a culture that highly appreciates politeness or, rather, as less serious than it is intended to be, whereas the translation into Romance languages, including Romanian, is too direct, also lacking the politeness mark given by the verb in the second-person plural (i.e. 'Spălați-vă pe mâini' would be better than 'spală-te pe mâini') or by the impersonal structure 'Este necesar să vă spălați pe mâini'. Another problem is that Google Translate does not cover all the languages into which the information on COVID-19 had to be translated. Actually, out of 89 target-languages, 25 were missing (McCulloch, 2020).

The examples of faulty machine translations are numerous, but I shall present only two of the most potentially dangerous ones. In an automatic translation from English into Spanish of the information leaflet of an antiviral medicine, the phrase "once a day" was rendered as "eleven times a day", because 'once' in Spanish means "eleven". Similarly, in a translation from Spanish into English, the Spanish word 'boca', meaning "mouth", was wrongly spelt as 'poca', meaning "little", and translated as "the minimum dose", instead of "oral administration" (Leonardi, 2022, 3). Both examples show what every specialized translator knows: errors in machine translations are utterly critical when it comes to drug posology.

In spite of all these negative outcomes of machine translation, there was an instance in which it proved to be useful. In the middle of the worldwide sanitary crisis, the Chinese government created an application entitled Foreign Languages Translation Toolkit for Anti-COVID-19, addressed to the COVID-19 patients who were not in their country of origin and could not speak the language of the region where they were hospitalized. The same text, translated into all the most popular languages, contained information on the medical units in different areas around the globe, the specific symptoms of the disease, the treatment for milder forms and the main steps to be taken in order to be admitted to the nearest hospital in case of a severe form. This application of multi-modal translation could be used

on any smart device and was highly appreciated for its role in helping many people to overcome critical situations (Luo, 2021).

As a better alternative to machine translation and as a more cost-effective and resource-saving option than human specialized translation, the use of images instead of texts was a really helpful way to communicate essential information during the COVID-19 pandemic. The infographics (i.e. placards with pictures about washing hands correctly, wearing a mask or keeping physical distance) have proved to be very efficient in conveying the message as they do not need to be translated into various languages and, thus, they reduce the costs, effort and time. They can be considered a part of the Simplified Technical Language (STL), since they can reduce an entire informative brochure to a few images and short texts beneath them, to make them easily understood or, in other words, "usable". One advantage of this "a picture is worth a thousand words" strategy is that it significantly improves comprehensibility and shortens the time people need to assimilate information. As a positive result, the instructions contained in these pictures accompanied by short, simple texts are more accurately and effectively carried out even by people who have an elementary level of the language in question. Although these infographics are seen as universal, since they contain the same instructions related to the measures to prevent the disease from spreading, they may differ from one region to another, depending on the cultural specificity. For example, in Asian countries (e.g. Japan, South Korea), where wearing a mask while affected by cold or flu was already common, the infographics did not insist on this practice, but on other sanitary measures.

Human translations and interpreting, machine translations, multi-lingual applications and infographics were all part of a general approach to crisis communication around the world; the information related to the evolution of the pandemic needed to be disseminated in the shortest amount of time and to the largest audiences. The activity carried out by translators, interpreters, terminologists and IT specialists was impressive and, despite constant challenges, was met with people's gratitude, proving that care and empathy could triumph in front of any crisis.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed not only our lifestyle, getting us more familiar with online entertainment, e-shopping and tele-working, but also our communication practices. As it implied an inflation of information on medical topics, it forced us to learn new terms and to use them in our daily conversations. Terminological creativity, both locally developed and influenced by English as a global language, was amazing and proved that people could adapt to crisis situations not only from the medical or social viewpoint, but also from the linguistic perspective.

Medical translation and interpretation became more important than ever, due to the ordinary people's need to keep abreast of all the developments of this unprecedented situation and to the doctors' and patients' need to communicate safely and efficiently. Overwhelmed by this constant pressure, many medical translators and interpreters gave up and terminated their collaboration agreements with hospitals or other medical institutions, but others, braver and more dedicated, worked as volunteers in hospitals, thus exposing themselves to the same risks as the medical staff. In a desperate attempt to find a quick solution to the shortage of specialized translators and interpreters, many medical institutions resorted to machine translation, which they considered developed enough to provide if not a very good translation, at least a safe one. The results were disastrous, as it turned out that machine translation in the medical field is not yet a viable alternative to human translation, putting patients' life in danger more than the disease itself.

Unlike machine translation, which showed its risks and limitations, infographics proved to be an efficient solution for presenting essential information and instructions in a very short time, without extra costs or effort. Despite their seemingly universal character, cultural differences should still be taken into consideration, since an image that makes a great impact on a certain audience could be meaningless for another, depending on their culture-bound daily routines.

All in all, the strategies used by translators, interpreters and terminologists to deal with this communication crisis proved to be the right ones and, eventually, all their efforts paid off, as many patients' lives were saved and a lot of information was correctly rendered due to their work; therefore, we could say that, alongside the medical staff, they have played a significant part in the correct management of the COVID-19 pandemic and deserve our appreciation.

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