

# Correspondence

## The integration of emergency language services in COVID-19 response: a call for the linguistic turn in public health

Linguistic barriers in health services on a multilingual society could bring patients to a life-threatening situation as they might not be able to express their symptoms to a healthcare provider or a medical professional.<sup>1</sup> Earlier studies published in this journal prove that overcoming linguistic barriers create trust and participation among patients belong to minority groups<sup>2</sup> and reduces patient nonattendance in required medical treatments necessary for their illnesses' remedy.<sup>3</sup>

In this globalized world, it is inevitable that when the COVID-19 global pandemic ends, the 'new normal' will be back to 'normal' and intercultural contact will continue as we learn to adapt to living with the virus in our midst just as similar pandemics that our predecessors in history have experienced. As there exist 7117 living languages in the world,<sup>4</sup> most of which have undergone the process of intellectualization in the field of public health, the current pandemic that we are experiencing hastened the need for the medical professionals to localize and internationalize public health education materials in various languages.<sup>5</sup>

Going beyond English language-centric knowledge production in public health studies are needed to combat COVID-19 and future pandemics that may arise. Li *et al.*<sup>6</sup> suggested that there is a need for an 'epistemological shift from the global north to the global south where multilingual realities form thousands of years of history and civilization, and where indigenous knowledge constitutes the essence of guiding principles embedded in social practice'. This includes recognizing the significance of language diversity in public health responses and healthcare workplace settings.

Recently published researches by linguists reveal that the integration of emergency language services and management in the COVID-19 response help mitigate the spread of the virus in grassroots communities. As the virus became an outbreak in the Chinese mainland, experts of the Chinese language collectively organized an 'Epidemic Language Service Corps' tasked to provide standardized emergency language services and translate health education materials related to the virus in the major language spoken in the country. They regarded that the construction of a language emergency ser-

vice is a practical policy for local and national governments to develop a knowledge base that could be utilized in outbreak mitigation measures and mobilization mechanism.<sup>7</sup>

Shanghai, a metropolitan city historically known to be a settlement of Europeans and various nationalities, utilized foreign university student–volunteers and coordinated them with local community health workers that were tasked to provide the necessary COVID-19 mitigation campaigns and responses in multicultural communities. This limited their number of positive cases to only 714 as of August 2020.<sup>8</sup>

The creative turn of public health was initially proposed in this journal<sup>9</sup> with the objective to 'offer an alternative form of knowledge as a necessary complement to the range of data available to policymakers'. To add in the eventual interdisciplinarity of public health studies, we also propose a linguistic turn in the field as the COVID-19 pandemic grounded health policy leaders to the fact that in a globally connected world, intercultural communication is a necessity is to mitigate and respond to health outbreaks.

### References

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Jeconiah Louis Dreisbach<sup>1</sup>, Sharon Mendoza-Dreisbach<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Filipino Department, De La Salle University, Manila 1004, Philippines

<sup>2</sup>School of Business, Skyline University College, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Address correspondence to Jeconiah Louis Dreisbach,  
E-mail: jeconiah.dreisbach@dlsu.edu.ph

**Jeconiah Louis Dreisbach**, Assistant Professorial Lecturer  
of Philippine Studies

**Sharon Mendoza-Dreisbach**, Assistant Professor of Public  
Administration and Human Resource Management

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