



Emergency language policy: Principles and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article introduces and discusses the concept of Emergency Language Policy. Traditionally, research in language policy and planning has been concerned with studying language policy from a long-term perspective, for example, multi-annual plans for the protection and promotion of minority languages. However, research has not paid enough attention to the study of language policies in emergency situations, when usually there is no or little time to study and investigate in-depth the existing conditions before planning interventions, and preparing complex policy plans. The study of language policy in emergency, on the one hand, should focus on the preparation of flexible rapid intervention contingency plans to be deployed in case of need, and on the other hand on the creation and maintenance of systems capable of reacting to the unpredictable and monitoring short-term changes. The COVID-19 outbreak, provides the opportunity to critically examine the way multilingual communication was handled in 2020, particularly in relation to linguistic minorities, and draw useful lessons for the future. We discuss the impact of language barriers during emergency situations and provide a typology thereof. To better illustrate this idea, we review several examples (both bad and good) from various countries across Europe. We focus on the impact of the pandemic on minority language groups, which was found to be on average bigger than for the rest of the population. While this article does not aim at proposing a theory of Emergency Language Policy, it set out some recommendations and principles for future policies to minimise inequalities that structurally disadvantage linguistic minorities.

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