

# Language challenges of Covid-19 are a pressing issue

In mid-March, we issued a call for papers for a special issue of the international sociolinguistics journal *Multilingua* devoted to “[Linguistic diversity and public health: sociolinguistic perspectives on Covid-19](#)” edited by [Ingrid Piller](#) (Macquarie University, Sydney), [Jie Zhang](#) (Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan), and [Jia Li](#) (Yunnan University, Kunming).

This is an update on the extraordinary response to [our call for papers](#), which demonstrates that language challenges of Covid-19 are a pressing issue for linguists worldwide.



The Covid-19 pandemic is also a communication crisis

## *Emerging research agenda for crisis sociolinguistics*

We received more than 200 abstracts – or about ten times more than we anticipated – from scholars from around the world, mostly from the global South. These abstracts fall into five broad categories, which might constitute a basis for a sociolinguistics of the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. Linguistic limitations in the governmental provision of public health information and other public service communication to linguistically diverse populations in different countries and regions
2. (In)accessibility of public health information to disadvantaged and minoritized groups, including indigenous populations, migrants and refugees, and people with disabilities
3. Top-down and bottom-up language management efforts and strategies adopted to overcome language barriers during the crisis
4. (Critical) discourse analyses of political speeches, media reports, and social media posts, particularly of Covid19-related racism and discrimination
5. Problems related to translation and multilingual terminology standards in public health information and medical research

The majority of the abstracts we received were excellent and in a first step we limited our selection to studies in categories 1-3 because these matched [our call for papers](#) most closely. However, given the page limits of our special issue, we had to make some further very difficult decisions.

#### *International research collaboration is vital*

The strong global response to our call for papers with abstracts coming in from over 30 different countries also brought home to us the importance of international collaboration. And, perhaps even more so, the threats international collaboration is currently facing as many retreat into their own tribes. We therefore took time out from one of our editorial meetings to record a short video for the [#ResearchAcrossBorders](#) campaign launched by the [Humboldt Foundation](#).

#### *Covid-19 special issue of Multilingua to focus on Chinese sociolinguistic research*

With these considerations in mind, we eventually decided to focus the special issue further on Chinese perspectives. Our reasons for doing so were not only that China is 2-3 months ahead of the rest of the world in the Covid-19 crisis but also as a way to open a space for dialogue between “Chinese” and “Western” sociolinguistics.

The Chinese world is highly multilingual and language barriers to accessing public health information are a pressing concern to linguistic minorities – both indigenous and migrant – within China, as well as in the global Chinese diaspora. At the same time, many Chinese governmental agencies, academic institutions, and grassroots groups have been actively [responding to the language and communication needs of linguistically diverse populations](#).

We would like to stress that we did not anticipate this narrower focus when we issued the call for papers, and that it is the result of the extraordinarily strong response we received.

*Language on the Move and Multilingua to continue to provide forums for sociolinguistics of Covid-19*

Given that we had to reject so many relevant and important abstracts, we felt it was necessary to provide additional platforms for these pressing debates about the linguistic implications of Covid-19. Therefore, we would like to issue the following two open and ongoing calls:

1. **[Language on the Move series devoted to language challenges of Covid-19](#)**

This growing series already attracts a readership from around the globe and we would like to expand it further, including as a resource for online teaching and learning in Applied Linguistics. We would therefore like to invite researchers to submit blog posts for inclusion in the series.

[Guidelines for research bloggers on Language on the Move are available here.](#)

2. ***Multilingua* to make additional slots of individual papers related to Covid-19 available**

In addition to the special issue, which is scheduled for publication in September this year, we will turn over a significant number of slots for individual papers in *Multilingua* to language challenges of Covid-19 over the next two years.

We welcome submissions to *Multilingua* through our normal submission process to be considered for such a slot. You can [find information about the journal here](#) and [detailed submission guidelines here](#).

Many more platforms and publications will undoubtedly come on line or are already emerging such as the [Journal of Global Indigeneity](#)'s call for papers for a special issue devoted to "[Indigenous Innovation in Higher Education during the Corona-virus pandemic](#)" or the "[Language resources](#)" page of the [International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 website](#).

There is no doubt that **the pandemic has brought linguistic inequality to the fore in globally unprecedented ways and will continue to shape sociolinguistic research agendas for some time to come.** For now, watch out for [Multi-lingua](#) issue 39(5), which will come out in September this year.