Multilingual accessibility of websites in relation to translation policies

Municipal websites in the Helsinki metropolitan area during the COVID-19 pandemic

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This article analyzes the availability and accessibility of multilingual coronavirus information on the websites of the three largest cities in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to assess whether these websites fulfilled their objective of providing access to coronavirus information in the needed languages for the residents of the area. The research questions are: (1) How accessible were the websites in terms of findability, timeliness, and language coverage? (2) How did the practices on the websites reflect the translation policies of the municipalities? The material consists of website data, interviews, and municipal policy documents. The results demonstrate that the cities clearly saw the provision of multilingual information as a priority, and translations were available in up to twenty non-national languages. However, cities' translation policies were poorly defined, they were unprepared for the timely publication of crisis information in multiple languages on their websites, and their crisis communication plans did not adequately address the needs of multilingual populations.

Keywords: multilingual websites, health information, accessibility of information, translation policy, crisis translation, COVID-19

1. Introduction

This article discusses the availability and accessibility of pandemic information from the perspective of cities (i.e., the local governing administrations) and the multilingual populations for whom they are responsible. We conceptualize municipal translation policies during the COVID-19 pandemic as an implementation of broader crisis communication objectives that are manifest in governmen-

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tal crisis preparedness and communication plans. To this end, we consider the municipal COVID-19 websites of the three largest cities of the Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland, as outcomes of such translation policies, focusing particularly on the translation practices. We aim to assess whether these websites fulfilled the objective outlined in their crisis communication plans, namely, to provide foreign-language-speaking inhabitants of the area access to COVID-19 information. During a crisis, cities have a specific responsibility to inform residents in a timely and equal manner of changes or interruptions in the provision of services for which they are responsible. By multilingual accessibility, we mean the overall linguistic accessibility of the information on these websites during the crisis.[1]

At the beginning of the pandemic in Finland, the role of multilingualism was emphasized in public safety discussions. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2020) reported that in spring 2020, approximately 25% of positive COVID-19 cases were among foreign-language-speakers, who constituted only 18% of the population in the Helsinki metropolitan area. This raised concerns about whether these individuals received sufficient information on the disease (Finell et al. 2021; Skogberg et al. 2021). To address this, a significant amount of public information was translated into other languages. Municipal websites served as key platforms for disseminating health-related information locally. Initially, other communication channels were less effective due to restrictions on public gatherings. However, the use of multiple channels and community organizations for information dissemination later became widely accepted (see also Federici 2022; O'Brien et al. 2021; Pym et al. 2022).

The above-mentioned communication objectives regarding wider linguistic access to information resulted in policy outputs in the form of multilingual COVID-19 webpages. In this article, we seek answers to the following questions:

1. How accessible were these webpages in terms of findability, timeliness, and the languages used?
2. How did the websites reflect the translation policies of the municipalities?

To answer these questions, we analyze three data sets: (1) the multilingual COVID-19 websites of the three largest cities in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa), which were available at the beginning of 2021; (2) interviews with municipal communication professionals, explaining the actions taken with regard to the websites; and (3) public crisis communication guidelines and other material providing information on emergency language policies in

1. Multilingual accessibility also encompasses accessibility issues related to disabilities, such as the difficulties visually impaired users encounter when navigating translated digital content online (see Rodríguez Vázquez and Torres-del-Rey 2019, for example).

these municipalities. The websites constitute the principal data source in our analysis. They are construed as concrete manifestations (i.e., outcomes) of municipal translation policies (and as indices of linguistic diversity). Interviews and guidelines are construed as additional sources of information regarding translation policies, for example, as sources of the interviewees' and policy makers' implicit understandings relating to languages, translation, and translation processes, and as sources of information on how such policies emerged.

In translation studies, crisis communication strategies have been evaluated using the principles of the 4-A framework (O'Brien et al. 2018, 628). Previously, this evaluation scheme was employed to assess human rights obligations to education (Tomaševski 2001). O'Brien et al. (2018) adapted the scheme for translation to provide a structured analysis of how countries consider the right to translated information during crises. This framework was also utilized by Krystallidou and Braun (2023). The framework offers four standards for translated information: (1) *availability*, ensuring translated information is recognized as essential; (2) *accessibility*, determining if translation is free, delivered on multiple platforms, in various modes, and in all relevant languages; (3) *acceptability*, ensuring the accuracy and appropriateness of the translated information; and (4) *adaptability*, assessing whether translation can be adjusted to different scenarios, such as varying language requirements, literacies, technological demands, new delivery modes, diverse hazards, and population movements (O'Brien et al. 2018, 628). Our analysis concentrates on the first two standards: availability of the information in the languages of the citizens and accessibility of translated information in terms of findability and timeliness on the websites of the three cities.

Multilingual crisis communication performance was also examined using a maturity model that evaluates practices based on their level of maturity. Initially, practices may exist at a reactionary and ad-hoc level before being defined and evolving into proactive, ideal practices (Mohamed and Qu 2018, 2). During the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, O'Brien and Cadwell (2021, 3) employed such a model to evaluate the maturity level for translation implementation as part of crisis response and to suggest improvements.

Our study is inspired by issues and phenomena identified in the literature on translation policy that refer to the multilingual websites of governmental bodies as online manifestations of an existing translation policy (McDonough Dolmaya 2020; González Núñez and Fresno 2023). We contribute to this body of research by analyzing how municipalities position themselves on their websites with respect to non-official languages (McDonough Dolmaya 2020, 552) and their own translation policies. From the perspective of online municipal crisis communication, we also contribute to the wealth of research raising awareness about translation problems during crises and the role of deficiencies in crisis communi-

cation strategies (O'Brien et al. 2018, 627; O'Brien and Federici 2020, 13; Federici 2022).

The article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we define how we understand public policy and provide a brief overview of the existing literature on translation policy and multilingual online communication at local levels of government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data and methods are described in Section 3. In Section 4, the analysis is divided into four parts: (1) the multilingual profile of the Helsinki metropolitan area, (2) the crisis preparedness of the three cities in their strategic communication plans, (3) language coverage of COVID-19 websites, and (4) issues regarding the accessibility of multilingual online information. In Section 5, we conclude with our findings on the cities' translation policies as reflected in municipal practices.

2. Translation policy and online health communication in municipalities

Public policy can be generally understood as an activity that is formed collectively by government to achieve a goal using diverse means (Howlett and Cashore 2014, 17; González Núñez 2022, 183). Some policies reflect guidelines created at higher levels of governmental hierarchy and are applied at the local level, while others are created and established at the local level based on the prescribed responsibilities of a municipality. Language policy, in turn, can be defined as "a public policy aimed at addressing a social, economic, political, or organizational issue related to the management of linguistic diversity in a territory" (Gazzola et al. 2024, 1), and, as Meylaerts (2011, 744–745) highlights, there is no language policy without a translation policy. Typically, a translation policy results from "a series of intentionally coherent decisions on translation or translation activities taken by public — and sometimes private — actors in order to resolve collective linguistic and translation problems" (Meylaerts 2018, 222).

However, without higher-level guidance, translation policies are often characterized by ad hoc choices at the local level (González Núñez 2013a, 405). The language policy of an organization is not always clearly articulated or defined, nor does it always have a written form. It can also "emerge incrementally from practices" if language policies have not yet taken an established form in the course of the organization's history (Koskinen 2020, 115; 133). Moreover, a single policy (like a translation policy) is often influenced by other policies, such as non-discrimination policies (González Núñez 2013b, 486).

If a translation policy is perceived to be like any other public policy, it must be understood as often implicit rather than explicit, taking the form of organizational practice embedded in ongoing processes at various levels and contexts with mul-

tiple actors. It may consist of non-decisions rather than decisions and be unsaid rather than explicitly expressed. Public policy can be decoded in situations where an organization is willing to be seen as having a policy but concurrently lacks a cohesive one. Additionally, it can be seen as a process that produces and reproduces shared cultural meanings, values, and ideologies (Jenkins 2007, 24–29; Hill 2005, 6–10).

For the analytical operationalization of the concept of translation policy, González Núñez (2016, 92–93; 101) applies Spolsky's tripartite language policy model consisting of three interacting components (Spolsky 2004). The first component, *translation management*, involves institutional decisions on whether to translate content within a special domain. These decisions can be overt (codified in policy documents) or covert. The second component, *translation practices*, includes activities resulting from these decisions or implicit management policies, such as which texts are translated, and which languages are used in specific situations. The third component, *translation beliefs*, encompasses the often unspoken views on the role and value of language and translation in different communities and the choice of languages for communication.

So far, there has been relatively little research on translation policies concerning multilingual information on municipal websites and the development of such policies, although the overall usability of municipal websites has indeed been researched from the perspective of languages (e.g., Baker 2009). As such, the availability of multilingual websites shows that a public organization both has a language policy and acknowledges the importance of different language groups residing in the community (Benavides et al. 2021). If translations are given no priority on a website, it signals a certain value of translation (and thereby other languages) within that organization (González Núñez 2019, 782–784). Only recently has a body of research explicitly focused on websites and translation policies (McDonough Dolmaya 2020; González Núñez and Fresno 2023). General language access rules have a greater likelihood of turning into translation policy outputs (localized websites) if such obligations are first transferred into local written rules concerning, e.g., a state agency (González Núñez and Fresno 2023, 122).

To implement an efficient communication policy in a public health crisis, municipalities should, first, consider the use of languages as part of their everyday communication infrastructure and expressly include an up-to-date translation policy in their emergency plans (Federici 2022, 2; 13). According to crisis communication research carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this had not been widely implemented in emergency planning (O'Brien et al. 2018; O'Brien and Federici 2020, 130; 138; Piller, Zhang, and Li 2020, 503). From the perspective of public policy research, this outcome is understandable, since improving a policy often necessitates a process in which many actors with diverging interests —

including civil servants, interest groups, and politicians — discuss it. This process may sometimes even appear irrational and uncontrollable (Hill 2005, 4–6); certainly, this seems to be the case when academic researchers and translation professionals examine such policies retrospectively (see, e.g., Pym et al. 2022).

Translated online information, particularly information on local health services, is considered important, as country-specific information in one's own language is not available elsewhere on the internet, e.g., in the countries of origin (Samkange-Zeeb et al. 2020, 9). During the pandemic, it was observed in Norway that despite the existence of crisis communication plans at all levels of public administration, practical execution plans — including translation activities and the adaptation of communication for migrant target groups — were scarce, and the role of migrant languages in communication was not clearly acknowledged (Felberg 2021, 98; 111). The necessity of a clear translation policy at all levels of public administration is evident (Felberg 2022, 134). Felberg (2022) identified several challenges related to multilingual communication, including the substantial number of translations and languages involved, constant policy changes, problems relating to the recruitment of translators, and translation quality. In addition, there was no systematic approach to procuring translations across administrations, and translation services were provided by all kinds of actors, from multilingual staff to freelance translators.

In another study focusing on migrants' experiences in Norway during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findability of translated health information in migrant languages emerged as a central problem, emphasizing the necessity of developing communication strategies to provide migrants with culturally and linguistically adapted information (Czapka et al. 2022, 4; 7).

3. Data and methods

For this article, we gathered data on translation practices from 2021–2023. To analyze these practices, we collected material from the multilingual COVID-19 information websites of the three cities in the Helsinki metropolitan area on 3, 4 and 10 February 2021, during the third wave of the pandemic in Southern Finland. At that time, new infections were rapidly increasing, and new variants were spreading (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021). The vaccination program had commenced on 26 December 2020, and the data collection period coincided with changes in COVID-19 testing policies and an updated strategy to control the pandemic (STM 2021).

The website material was analyzed by counting the number of languages present and comparing these with the number of speakers in the respective city. Additionally, we examined website navigation for locating material published in various languages and assessed the placement of information on the website. The publication dates of information in different languages were also compared.

To evaluate website practices, we collected policy guidelines on multilingual communication. In 2023, we contacted seventy municipal authorities responsible for departmental communications, receiving twenty-three responses, some representing multiple units. Despite this inquiry, we were only granted access to public guidelines, which were examined for references to municipal communication practices, languages, or translation. Six relevant crisis communication guidelines were analyzed. Additionally, interviews with three municipal communication officers from 2021 and 2022, conducted as part of two other research projects (Määttä et al. 2022a, 2022b), were used as supplementary sources (see Table 1).

Table 1. Data description

Data	Authority/Agency	Date
Screen shots from pandemic webpages, pdf documents (277 items)	Espoo, Helsinki, Vantaa	3, 4, and 10 Feb 2021
Municipal communication guidelines (6 policy documents)	Espoo (3) Helsinki (2) Vantaa (1)	2009, 2014, 2015 2019a, b 2011
Online Communication Guide for Municipalities	The Association of Finnish Cities and Municipalities	2010
National-level guidance: National Pandemic Preparedness Plan	Ministry of Social Affairs and Health	2012
Crisis communication assessment reports	Helsinki (KPMG) (3) Vantaa (Survey report) (1)	2020, 2021, 2022 2021
3 interviews with communication officers (one from each City)	Espoo, Helsinki, Vantaa	2021–2022

4. Linguistic accessibility of municipal websites as an outcome of translation policies

Based on the aforementioned data, the availability and accessibility of translated information were assessed. Section 4.1 describes the multilingual profile of the

cities. Section 4.2 evaluates the translation policies in the communication plans. Section 4.3. estimates the language coverage of the translated information available. Finally, Section 4.4 analyzes website accessibility from a multilingual perspective.

4.1 Multilingual profile of the Helsinki metropolitan area

Since the Language Act of 1922, Finland has been officially bilingual, with Finnish and Swedish as the national languages. While both languages are official at the national level, the official languages of municipalities depend on the number and proportion of speakers. Municipalities can be monolingual in Finnish or Swedish, or else bilingual. Additionally, municipal services in Sámi languages are available. Most municipalities have Finnish as the official language. While authorities are not legally required to communicate in languages other than Finnish or Swedish, they may offer services in other languages, particularly in the social and healthcare sectors. Finnish municipalities have significant autonomy in organizing communication with migrant populations.

According to the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014, 5 §) and the Administrative Procedure Act (434/2003, 8 §, 26 §), authorities must assess and promote equality in their activities, ensuring measures are effective and appropriate given their environment and resources. Additionally, authorities should advise residents on administrative matters and respond to service-related inquiries. On this basis, many municipalities organize multilingual guidance. Municipalities determine the extent and language of communication beyond the official languages (Kuntaliitto 2024). In crises, the need for communication in English and other languages is assessed case by case.

The three major cities of the Helsinki metropolitan area are bilingual, with Finnish being the majority language. At the end of 2020, roughly a month before the data were collected, the area had a total population of 1,186,917 inhabitants (Official Statistics of Finland 2021).[2] The mother tongue of 18.2% of residents was a non-national language (see Table 2). Russian was the most common foreign language (3% of all residents), followed by Estonian (2.1%), Somali (1.5%), Arabic (1.5%), and English (1.1%).

2. In 2020, Helsinki had 656,920 residents, of which 109,254 spoke a foreign language. Espoo had 292,796 residents, of which 55,624 were foreign language speakers. Vantaa had 237,231 residents, of which 51,160 were foreign language speakers.

Table 2. Speakers of national languages and the ten most common non-national languages in the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa in 2020 (Official Statistics Finland 2021)

Language	Speakers in the three cities: number and percentage share of all residents in the area	
Finnish	909,107	76.6%
Swedish	62,303	5.2%
Sámi	99	0.01%
All national languages	**971,419**	**81.8%**
All non-national languages	**246,038**	**18.2%**
1. Russian	35,939	3%
2. Estonian	24,459	2.1%
3. Somali	17,938	1.5%
4. Arabic	17,293	1.5%
5. English	12,938	1.1%
6. Chinese	8353	0.7%
7. Kurdish	7366	0.6%
8. Farsi	7187	0.6%
9. Albanian	6954	0.6%
10. Vietnamese	5842	0.5%

4.2 Preparedness of the three cities in their strategic communication plans

Our analysis reveals that the national pandemic preparedness plan — implemented after the global Influenza A (H1N1) pandemic in 2009–2010 and still in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic — neither recognized nor properly evaluated the needs of effective multilingual and multicultural communication (STM 2012). This oversight is common in preparedness plans (O'Brien and Cadwell 2021, 3; O'Brien et al. 2018; Federici et al. 2021). The plan did not include language resource planning or measures for multilingual audiences. Language was mentioned only once, stating that pandemic communication must be available in Finnish, Swedish, English, and Sámi, and partially in Russian and Somali, with other languages included if necessary (STM 2012, 87). However, in the period 2012–2022, the foreign language population doubled (Official Statistics of Finland 2023), indicating that the plan was outdated.

Regarding communication at the municipal level, Finnish authorities are obliged to communicate to all resident groups according to the Local Government Act, which rules that "[i]n communications, clear and comprehensible language must be used, and the needs of the municipality's different groups of residents must be taken into account" (Municipalities Act 410/2015). According to the preparatory legislative work of the act (Administration Committee Report 55/2014), every municipality should define these groups, including people whose mother tongue is not Finnish or Swedish. The needs of these groups may determine the most appropriate means and forms of communication and interaction. In what follows, municipal and national-level communication guidelines are analyzed from the perspective of general multilingual communication policies, including the perspective of translation management at the local level and language policy at the national level.

The City of Helsinki general communication guidelines (Helsinki 2019a) note that communication should serve all city residents by using both official languages and the other languages used by residents. The city should therefore cater to the needs of linguistic and other minorities, as well as people with disabilities of all kinds; all residents have the right to adequate information. In addition, the city should have an active website in English, as well as helpdesks for other languages and a multilingual online information service. The city should also cooperate with local multilingual media to improve access to information about the city and its services. However, the actual *City of Helsinki crisis communication guidelines* (Helsinki 2019b) do not contain recommendations for deciding the grounds upon which communication languages are recognized; rather, they require city departments to have their own detailed guidelines.

The City of Vantaa crisis communication guideline (Vantaa 2011) states that crisis communication should ensure that different linguistic communities receive information. The plan clearly indicates that the communication department is prepared to use both interpreting and translation services (during information events and in the production of press releases) and has arranged for these services to be provided both by the city's own translators and the Community Interpreting Centre (ibid., 9).

The City of Espoo communication guidelines (Espoo 2014) state that, if necessary (e.g., in crisis situations), the city will communicate in more than its usual three languages, which are Finnish, Swedish, and English (the third official service language of the city). The guidelines further state that crisis communication must be organized professionally. A draft of *The City of Espoo crisis communication guideline* (Espoo 2009) verifies that all announcements may be published in fifteen languages when necessary. *The City of Espoo crisis communication guideline for managers* (Espoo 2015) states that communication must pay attention to

serving different language groups and people with sensory impairments. The general crisis communication guideline calls for catering to the information needs of different language groups and requires a crisis simulation to ensure communication capacity and resources. However, it does not provide clear methods for implementing these strategic objectives to reach the multilingual public during crises.

Almost a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Association of Finnish Municipalities instructed municipalities to prepare crisis information portals with all required language versions. The online communication guide recommended translating basic texts in advance and creating message templates in the main languages of the residents, including foreign languages, in advance (Kuntaliitto 2010). Municipalities could have prioritized these measures by integrating multilingual online communication into their strategic plans. English, while serving as the lingua franca on all city portals (with Espoo even having a policy promoting English alongside Finnish and Swedish) is not accessible to all and can be considered exclusive and discriminatory (Peterson 2022, 280–281). Small-scale surveys assessing COVID-19 communication strategies could influence future policies. A survey of Vantaa's multilingual services highlighted difficulties in reaching foreign language-speaking residents. Public-facing staff were asked about information provision and understanding. The study identified translation production as a key issue and emphasized the need for plain language, visual materials, especially videos, and consideration for the illiterate in communication development (Tahvanainen 2021).

The success of the City of Helsinki's external crisis communication relating to foreign-language-speakers was examined three times by an external actor (KPMG 2020; 2021; 2022) during the pandemic. Reports from 2020 and 2021 encouraged increased attention to be focused on communication with ethnic minorities. In spring 2020, many of the problems stemmed from the inherently reactive nature of communication during an acute crisis. The report from 2021 stated that external communication had continued with no major changes to the process itself, despite the problems discovered earlier. In spring 2021, there were still delays in sending messages in languages other than Finnish and Swedish, but it was possible to publish texts in the majority of the seven-to-eight most-used foreign languages within twenty-four hours. In 2022, the third survey stated that there had still been no significant progress made. After the pandemic, the City of Helsinki published a report that made no mention of any lessons learned regarding translation policy (Järvelä 2022).

In conclusion, in the general strategic communication guidelines published by the three cities in the Helsinki metropolitan area before the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no direct mentions of the importance of the quality of mul-

tilingual communication. There are also no validated specifications regarding *how* foreign-language-speaking residents should be informed, in practice, about municipal objectives and undertakings, whether in normal circumstances or crisis situations — or *how* public services should be organized to make them linguistically accessible for members of the public whose language proficiency in the local languages is not sufficient. The statements are of a rather general nature, characterized by expressions such as "translations are used where appropriate" and "foreign-language-speaking communities are taken into account if required." Municipal communication strategies name their general aims without explicitly defining how to reach them (see also Felberg 2021, 2022).

4.3 Language coverage of COVID-19 websites

The City of Helsinki offered online information on their COVID-19 website in five to twenty non-national languages. However, most information was targeted at only the five largest language speaker groups, namely Russian, Estonian, Somali, Arabic, and English, which covered 52% of the non-national-language-speaking population. For example, local COVID-19 related news was regularly published on the municipal websites in only these largest languages. The other fifteen languages in which information was provided were Albanian, Azeri, Bulgarian, Dari, Farsi, French, German, Kurmanji, Polish, Sorani, Spanish, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Uzbek.

The use of all twenty of these languages covered 70% of speakers of non-national languages in Helsinki. However, there was considerable variation in the kinds of information provided in these twenty languages. If all fifteen of the largest non-national languages had been used regularly for information dissemination, coverage would have been as high as 76%. Yet no translations were produced for some of the most spoken non-official languages — namely Nepali, Bengali, and Vietnamese — despite there being more speakers of Nepali and Bengali than German and French, for example. This may relate to the limited number of Nepali and Bengali translators and the fact that residents speaking these languages could also access the information in English or in Finnish (Määttä 2024, 23). On the Helsinki webpages, German and French were also used, contrary to Espoo and Vantaa. Whereas German is mainly a language of tourism, French functions as the lingua franca for some migrants with African backgrounds. Sub-Saharan African languages other than Somali were not used as translation languages in Helsinki, even though some of these languages, like Amhara, are spoken by more people than languages such as Bulgarian.

In the City of Espoo, thirteen of the languages used on the COVID-19 website are among the fifteen most spoken foreign languages in the city. Dari and Thai constitute an exception on the website since they are not among the fifteen most

spoken languages, whereas Tagalog and Spanish, which figure among the most spoken languages, were not included. The fifteen languages used cover 70% of the foreign-language population.

Although the City of Vantaa had the largest share of foreign language speakers proportionally at 21.6% of the population, fewer languages (Russian, Estonian, Arabic, Somali, Albanian, English, and Dari) were used on its website, with a coverage of 61% of all foreign language speakers. Of the languages used, Dari does not appear among the twenty most spoken non-national languages in the city, but it is the first language of many new refugees from Afghanistan. In Vantaa, roughly the same amount of information was provided in all seven languages, with minor exceptions.

All three cities published the most online information in their largest non-national languages. However, not all the cities' language choices had clear motives, and the number of non-national languages used varied between seven and twenty. The data did not allow us to infer which factors motivated the language choices in different situations, except for the fact that the size of the language community was, in most cases, the obvious guiding principle. However, the amount of information available in non-national languages was not always directly proportional to the size of the populations with non-national first languages, and there may be several reasons affecting this. In addition, some of the information was published for very small speaker populations with fewer than one thousand speakers, such as Bulgarian and Romanian. One explanation for the language pool used in particular settings may be that not all language communities were considered to require online information in their first language, based on, for example, the fact that they know the local language or a lingua franca in which translations are available. At the same time, translations were provided for some vulnerable, smaller language communities, because they could not access the information in the local language or a lingua franca.

4.4 Issues regarding the accessibility of multilingual online information

We identified three key issues regarding the accessibility of multilingual information: webpage design and information placement (Section 4.4.1), the findability of multilingual information and navigation language choice (Section 4.4.2), and timeliness in publishing the language versions (Section 4.4.3). Section 4.4.4 contrasts these findings with evidence from interviews with municipal communication officers.

4.4.1 *Webpage design and information placement*

The pandemic portals differed from the cities' usual web information architecture, representing temporary arrangements without a well-considered accessibility policy for multilingual content. This is evident in the placement of COVID-19 information within each city's website hierarchy. In Espoo, the information was under the Immigrant Services Site, indicating it was treated as a migration-related issue rather than a health care matter, as in Vantaa. In Helsinki, both the Department of Communication and the Health Care and Social Services Department provided information, despite multilingual and crisis communication typically being coordinated by the City Executive Office.

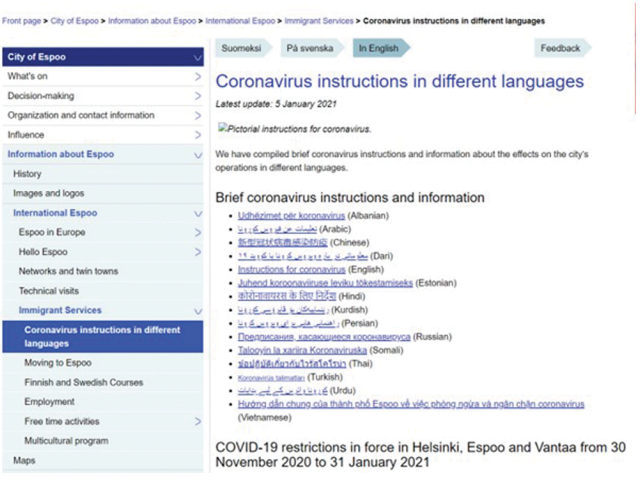

Figure 1. The Espoo multilingual information page provides a list of language links which lead to fifteen subpages

In terms of multilingual website design, Espoo had published one subpage per language, which is an outcome of the city's crisis communication guideline from 2009 allowing the translation of crisis announcements into fifteen languages. In Vantaa, the solution was similar (Figure 2): Each of the seven languages had a separate subpage providing roughly the same amount of information, with links to further subpages in the language containing additional information on vaccinations and/or quarantine measures.

Both Espoo and Vantaa aimed to provide similar content in all languages but organized their websites differently. Helsinki published all COVID-19 information on a single landing page divided into thematic subsections with links to different language versions on subpages (Figure 4). These administrative placement solutions were not always optimal for information findability, as discussed in Section 4.4.4. Similar results were also obtained by O'Brien et al. (2021).

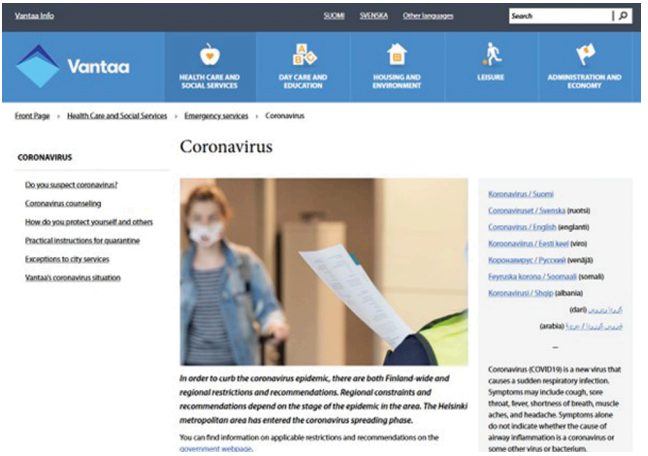

Figure 2. The Vantaa multilingual information page (here in English) provides a list of links that lead to seven foreign-language subpages

4.4.2 *Navigation and findability*

In line with previous studies (Higashi et al. 2021; Czapka et al. 2022), we identified significant navigation issues on the websites of all three cities from a foreign-language-speaker's perspective. Locating information required some knowledge of Finnish, Swedish, or English, making COVID-19 information inaccessible to newly arrived migrants with limited language proficiency. Poor findability reduced accessibility, indicating a lack of user-centered website development (as shown in Section 4.4.1) and the inadequate analysis of different groups' needs.

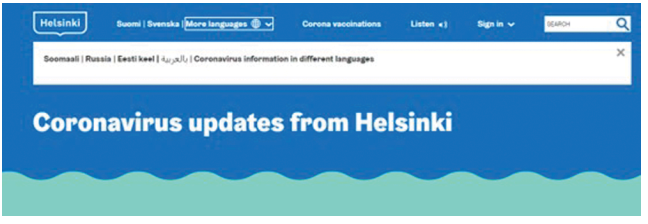

Figure 3. In the language menu, there is no indication of the availability of information in languages such as Dari or Uzbek

Figure 3 illustrates the top part of Helsinki's Coronavirus home page in English. To access this page, users must navigate from the City of Helsinki home page using Finnish, Swedish, or English. The navigation menu in Figure 3 offers three language options as alternatives to the English language page: *Suomi* ('Finnish'), *Svenska* ('Swedish'), and *More languages*. Clicking *More languages* opens a drop-

down menu with further options (marked in the red rectangle): *Somali*, *Russia* [sic], *Estonian*, and *Arabic* (the most spoken migrant languages). These links lead to dedicated pages for each language. Additionally, there is a link for *Coronavirus information in different languages*, which directs to an English-language page listing links in other languages (see Figure 4).

Speakers of languages not listed in the drop-down menu can access information in their language by selecting *Coronavirus information in different languages*. Similar headlines, such as *more languages* vs. *information in different languages*, may cause confusion. Clicking the *Coronavirus information in different languages* option leads to the *Coronavirus updates from Helsinki* page, which contains thematic link lists. Hyperlinks in seventeen languages reproduce the English main heading text, with the target language indicated in English metadata. Users seeking specific information, like isolation details in Dari, must scroll down the page, motivated by the expectation of finding relevant content (see Figure 4).

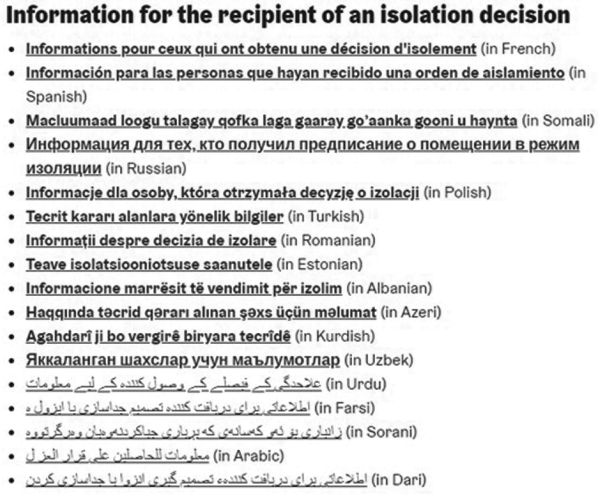

Figure 4. A screen capture from the Helsinki COVID-19 website showing some of the languages used (seventeen in this case)

The situation was similar on the websites of the cities of Espoo and Vantaa: to access information in their own language, it was necessary for users to first navigate through several pages in Finnish or English, with no prior indication of the availability of information in their own language.

4.4.3 *Timeliness of information*

A further issue with the language versions was their timely availability. On the Vantaa website, most language versions lacked publication or update dates, except for vaccination information and some news items. Rapidly changing information and delayed translations risked migrants receiving conflicting information from various sources. Without publication or update dates, determining the most current information was challenging. This issue was also present on the Espoo website, while the Helsinki website dated its language versions.

An example of timeliness issues is a Vantaa webpage where a news item in Finnish about a sudden transition to distance learning in a primary school was published three days prior. Links to language versions in English, Russian, Somali, Albanian, and Arabic were provided, but two days after the transition, the Russian, Arabic, and Albanian links still led to untranslated pages. The message stated: "The Russian/Arabic/Albanian language version will be published on this page as soon as it's ready" (Figure 5). Despite similar news for older pupils already being translated, these translations were not utilized, perhaps indicating a lack of coordination. In any case, for individuals who do not understand English (despite it being considered a lingua franca), this announcement was ineffective.

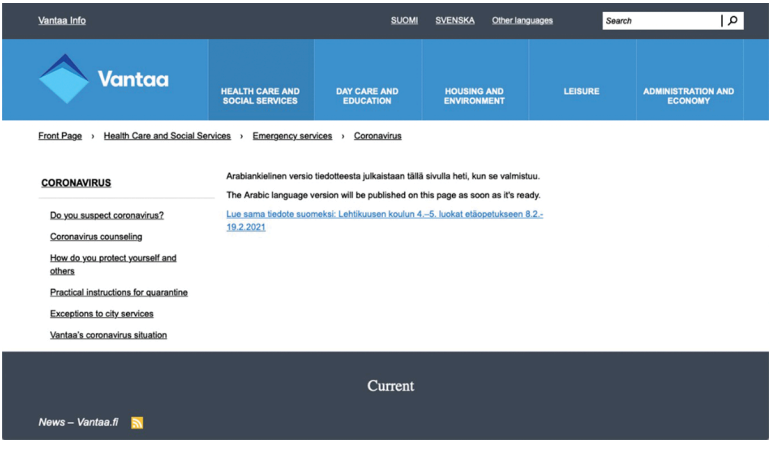

Figure 5. Information about the delayed Arabic translation

Another example of outdated information was on the Espoo webpage. The main COVID-19 instructions page included restrictions for Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa initially in force from 30 November 2020 to 31 January 2021, later extended to 28 February. On 3 February, four days after the extension, the Russian version still stated the restrictions were only until 31 January, potentially misleading Russian-speakers.

A further example from the Helsinki website could be considered discriminatory. Vaccination of the public began on 1 February, but information on booking appointments was available in English only two days later, giving Finnish and Swedish speakers an advantage. Compared to other languages, the delayed announcement in English provided inherently an advantage to English speakers. However, the assumption that English would function as a lingua franca in all contexts is problematic. By 10 February, speakers of other languages (except Arabic, English, and Russian) still had no vaccination information in their languages on the webpages.

4.4.4 *Evidence from interviews with municipal communication officers*

The issues discussed suggest that the cities' publication practices were poorly planned, and the integration of multiple foreign languages into their online communication infrastructures was lacking. A Helsinki communication officer confirmed this, noting that the Helsinki COVID-19 website was initially a temporary measure managed by multiple departments. The lack of proper policies is illustrated in the following summary:

> I was horrified by how confusing everything was. I kept asking why the Corona site was such a mess. They said it was done in a hurry, thinking the pandemic would end soon. But the situation kept changing, and more languages were added. Tasks shifted between departments, and when someone moved, their knowledge went with them. The new person would do things differently. The site was shut down, then restarted, and it became a sprawling mess. It was just a continuation of the continuation.
>
> (Interview by Tuija Kinnunen with Helsinki communication officer, 7 April 2022)[3]

3. The excerpt is a summarised translation of a Finnish-language interview segment by the first author. "Olin aivan kauhistunut, että miten sekava se setti oli, ja yritin sitä monesti kysyä, että miten tämä on mahdollista, että meillä toimii kaikki niin hyvin ja sitten tämä koronasivusto on tällainen palapeli. Sanottiin, että se oli niin kiireessä tehty, että ajateltiin, että korona menee kohta ohi, mutta sitten se aina muuttui se tilanne ja tuli lisää kieliä ja sitten saattoikin olla, että tehtävät vaihtuivat osastojen välillä. Niin kuin se, kuka oli pistänyt pystyyn sen nettisivun, niin hän vaikka vaihtoikin osastoa, niin se menikin se vastuu siellä hänen mukanaan, koska kukaan muu ei tiennyt, mitä siellä oli tehty, niin sitten se niin kuin periytyi seuraavalle, ja hän teki vähän eri lailla, ja sitten lopputuloksena koko korona on elänyt ja tilanteet ovat eläneet, ja sitten kun ajettiin alas kaikki ja sitten jouduttiinkin pystyttämään uudestaan, se on vähän mennyt sellaiseksi rönsyileväksi. Tämä oli kanssa sellainen, että nyt jos korona ei mene tälläkään kertaa ohi niin sitten rakennetaan niin kuin järkevä systeemi, että se on ollut vähän semmoista jatkon jatkoa, ilmeisestikin."

The interviewee mentions many issues that explain the unclear design of the Helsinki COVID-19 webpage. First, communication was being handled by two different departments (Health and Social Services and the Communication Department). Second, both departments were able to manage and publish information on the websites. Third, the ongoing changes in the pandemic situation influenced communication demands. Fourth, the website was set up in a hurry. Fifth, there were changes in the personnel responsible for the website.

The City of Vantaa communications officer problematized the usability of multilingual information due to the poor website structure that hindered people in locating COVID-19 information:

> Our problem was that the old website was very cumbersome. It was really difficult to find information about the pandemic on the website. And I don't really know if people could even find it back then. Now, they are going to make it easier to find.
>
> (Interview by Tuija Kinnunen with Vantaa communications officer, 17 March 2022)[4]

Despite their problematic design, the webpages played a crucial role in disseminating multilingual information. Authorities could use other channels to share online translations with audiences who did not use the internet. An interviewee from Espoo highlighted this:

> We are aware that a person who does not speak Finnish, Swedish, or English does not necessarily end up on the City's website just to see what they can find there. The information is there, but it is important that it is distributed through other channels. The City's official channels reach a certain number of people, but additionally, it is important that the information is also distributed through other networks.
>
> (Interview by Linda Rolig with Espoo communications officer, 3 March 2021)[5]

In addition to the websites, many other communication channels were used, such as personal letters to residents, information desks in malls, chatbots, social media,

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4. The excerpt is a summarised translation of a Finnish-language interview segment by the first author. "Meidän vanhat verkkosivut ovat olleet kyllä tosi hankalat. Niiltä on ollut hirveän hankala löytää niitä [koronasivuja], että en oikeasti tiedä, ketkä kaikki edes ovat löytäneet niitä silloin, että nyt toivottavasti tarkoitus on kyllä nyt kasata tuota se, ne helpommin löydettäviksi tuonne uusille sivuille."

5. "Se kyllä tiedostetaan, että kaupungin verkkosivuille ei välttämättä todellakaan päädy semmoinen, joka ei suomea tai ruotsia tai englantia osaa, katsomaan että mitähän täältä löytyisi. Vaikka ne sisällöt ovat siellä, niin sitten se on tärkeätä, että niitä jaetaan sitten muita kanavia pitkin."

telephone hotlines, and community radio stations; some of which catered to other language groups whose languages were not used as target languages in the translations published online (Määttä et al. 2022a).

5. Translation policies reflected in municipal translation practices

We aimed to investigate the availability and accessibility of multilingual health communication on municipal COVID-19 webpages in terms of findability, timeliness and the languages used, and to assess how the website practices aligned with the municipalities' actual translation policies. Our presupposition was that multilingual accessibility in health crises is shaped by political goals and depends on translation policies, which can be examined through website analysis. However, the official translation policies in the crisis communication plans were very vaguely formulated, stating that information should be provided in languages considered necessary and thus leaving much of room for different interpretations. Despite this vagueness, all plans aimed to reach out to all relevant groups of people during a crisis.

The online dissemination of multilingual health information relied on translation and website publication practices that were similar, at least to some extent, in all three cities under investigation. All had launched special webpages to distribute COVID-19 information in non-national languages. The most spoken non-official languages within the three cities were the most common target languages, indicating that the decision on which languages to cover was based on numbers. However, not all middle-sized language groups were catered for, while some very small language groups did receive translated information. This may reflect a knowledge-based decision that some groups needed or deserved access to online translations while others did not, possibly also indicating a moral-based decision category (Berezkina 2018). Nevertheless, this reasoning was not publicly available. Alternatively, this may indicate limited resources for translation management, the availability of translators, or multilingual competence, as reported by Berezkina (2018) and Felberg (2021, 2022). Both the complexity and the expense of managing language policies in a multilingual city may explain why all languages are not equal in the hierarchy of translation.

The availability of many languages on the pandemic webpages indicated that the cities had made a considerable effort to provide translated COVID-19 information to their foreign-language populations. A significant portion of this population (60–70%) received at least the most essential information in their own language — i.e., regarding protection, restrictions, and testing measures overseen by the municipalities. We view these efforts as policy makers taking a positive

stance towards foreign-language speakers, demonstrating a willingness to ensure equal access to information and recognizing the crucial role of translation in crisis communication.

However, the accessibility of the information may have been impeded by issues relating to information placement, findability, and timeliness. The municipalities were unaccustomed to providing information in more than the usual three languages, and the widespread use of foreign languages other than English was not part of their daily routine of government. Ad hoc solutions on the websites reflect the absence of a clearly defined translation policy with specific guidelines for online communication in migrant languages during crisis situations; thus, they were manifestations of an immature translation policy that was not yet defined, documented, or standardized (O'Brien and Cadwell 2021). Translation policies are vaguely formulated and non-binding within municipal communication plans: they simply state that multiple languages should be used when necessary. It seems that the actual translation policies principally exist in a non-articulated form, as they are not explicitly publicized in any guidelines.

Issues regarding the availability, findability, and timeliness of multilingual information seem to confirm the understanding that the actual meaning of a (translation) policy emerges only in practical situations, as the "unintended cumulative consequence[s] of a range of uncoordinated actions" (Jenkins 2007, 25). If translation policies do exist, they are continually shaped in practice rather than as a result of a policy process (cf. Hill 2005, 5). Furthermore, the unarticulated form of translation policies and the problems identified in website practices appear to indicate beliefs related to translation that do not fully acknowledge the demands of multilingual accessibility.

Judging from the public municipal crisis communication policies, the obvious operational aim of a municipal translation policy was to guarantee the dissemination of the required health-related information in all necessary languages as widely as possible. The translated webpage content, however, demonstrated the above-mentioned early-stage processual development point of the municipal translation policies. It is an additional question whether this information was utilized by the target audience. For example, website users may not feel welcome if navigation is difficult and information in their own language (if ever found, see O'Brien et al. 2021) is buried at the bottom of the webpage hierarchy. Consequently, the navigation experience can contribute to the unease of an already insecure health situation. Findability issues may signal "a certain value of translation" (Gonzáles Núñez 2019, 782–784). Translation delays pose an additional challenge, as individuals are disproportionately affected by disparities in the availability of health information. Although we did not analyze the quality of the information provided, the navigation difficulties signaled that the design of the webpages did

not fully consider the needs of vulnerable groups, which can include migrants with limited proficiency in the local language, low digital literacy, and low levels of education (Samkange-Zeeb et al. 2020, 9).

Overall, the COVID-19 websites uncovered the municipalities' true capacities for handling multiple communication languages during a crisis. For instance, the development of the City of Helsinki's pandemic website demonstrated challenges in multilingual information management. Our inference is that municipal websites emerged as products of unrefined translation policies that were themselves caused by underdeveloped crisis communication plans. This lack of preparedness at the strategic level led to operational issues which, in turn, highlight the challenges posed by a diverse society with its intricate multilingual communication systems and processes. This underscores the need for greater attention to diversity management.

To conclude, neither the political guidance nor the cities' internal strategic planning and policies forcefully supported the management and accessibility of multilingual information during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public guidelines revealed a lack of organizational awareness regarding issues of multilingual communication, such as coordination, planning, and the necessary resources for translation and information dissemination across multiple channels. In the guidelines, these aspects are not discussed in detail. As a result, the pandemic websites only partly fulfilled their aims to provide information in a timely and equal manner in the relevant languages. The published information was neither equally accessible nor available, even though foreign-language-speaking groups were mentioned in the crisis communication plans.

Furthermore, our analysis suggests that municipal online communication practices require significant investment in the field of translation management. However, the impact of any lessons learned (i.e., in pandemic communication) on future language policies within the municipalities remains uncertain. Despite the evident lack of recognition of translation issues in public assessment reports at the municipal level (Järvelä 2022), there are clear signs of changes to translation policies at the national level. The new development plans emphasize the importance of sufficient resources for multilingual communication and translation services (Prime Minister's Office 2023). Hopefully, this will result in more explicit guidance at the municipal level as well.

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