Exploring Translation (Un)Awareness

Recognizing the Role of Translation in Society

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1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2023, it was generally acknowledged that communicating reliable information on the disease to all members of society was essential for maintaining public safety. To reach out to those not fluent in the official or dominant language(s), much of this information was conveyed in translation. However, recent research has highlighted several issues in translated COVID-19 communication: despite the efforts made, these translations were not always accepted, trusted, or even found by their target audiences (see, e.g., Meylaerts et al. 2024; Pym et al. 2022).

In this chapter, translation awareness is used as an entry point to examine the translation efforts of public, private, and non-governmental organisations communicating information on COVID-19 to speakers of non-official languages in Finland and Estonia. In line with the Introduction to this volume, we approach translation awareness as the actors' understanding of the nature, role, and effects of translation, embracing their 'perception, recognition, understanding, appreciation, and critical assessment' of translation-related phenomena. The analysis is based on interview data collected during the pandemic, where issues in multilingual COVID-19 communication can often be traced back to the translation unawareness of the actors involved in the production, procurement, and dissemination of translations.

In our view, it is meaningful to analyse translation awareness in the context of the pandemic, as it showcases the crisis response to multilingual communication needs in organisations unaccustomed to communicating in a wide array of languages. When conducting the interviews, we focused on how the organisations dealt with the sudden change in the need for

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multilingual communication brought about by the pandemic – for example, how they managed the translation processes and monitored feedback, and what they identified as the best practices and the biggest challenges in the process. The very notion of translation awareness introduced in this volume originates from the analysis of these interviews: in going through the interview data, we felt that both the challenges and achievements reported in or inferred from the data were connected to the underlying perception of translation (see Kuusi et al. 2024).

In this chapter, we examine how the translation awareness of the interviewees and their organisations affected their communication efforts, comparing the approaches adopted in the two countries. This chapter proceeds as follows: in Section 2, we discuss previous research on multilingual COVID-19 communication from the perspective of translation awareness. In Section 3, we describe the Finnish and Estonian contexts of COVID-19 communication. In Section 4, we describe our data and method, and in Section 5, we explore our data with the goal of identifying indices of translation awareness and comparing the findings of the two datasets. In Section 6, we discuss our findings, highlighting the need to raise translation awareness within organisations.

2 Translation (un)awareness in previous research on multilingual COVID-19 communication

Across multiple settings, the pandemic functioned as a stress test for public organisations' translation awareness. Most authorities began with a limited understanding of linguistic needs beyond official languages, and recognition of these needs increased only once community feedback and public criticism exposed communication gaps. A research review by Krystallidou and Braun (2023) shows that centrally issued messages initially failed to reach linguistically diverse groups because information was unavailable in their languages, whereas locally devised, community-led solutions, often relying on volunteer mediators, proved effective (Krystallidou & Braun 2023, 134–140). The review concludes by recommending proactive structures and co-produced solutions. Similar findings were later reported in research focusing on Brussels, Australia, Montreal, and the Nordic countries (Bouyzourn et al. 2023; Macreadie et al. 2025; Córdoba Serrano 2025; Backholm & Nordberg 2023), reflecting an emergent awareness of multilingual audiences.

Australia provides a particularly instructive case. Research indicates that at the beginning of the pandemic, the authorities did not fully appreciate how translation quality and cultural acceptability shape attitudes towards health measures, or how translation management should be organised to enable quality assurance and continuous improvement (Pym et al. 2022,

115–116, 121–122). Official translations were delayed, hard to locate on websites, and often lacked locally relevant content (Pym et al. 2022, 115–116, 121–122). As reported in many research articles on Australia and elsewhere, public criticism or signs of eroding trust in official messaging prompted the authorities to pivot to community collaboration. While this shift signalled the perception and recognition of unmet needs, it also risked obscuring organisational responsibilities (e.g., Felberg 2021, 105, 112). Moreover, it was often implemented instead of – not alongside – the development of internal guidelines and workflows: for example, in Australia, the authorities externalised translation functions to communities without first addressing the restrictive code of conduct of their translators, the limited room for adaptation, the readability of the source texts, the translation strategies used and the management shortfalls that had constrained professional translators (Pym et al. 2022, 116, 121; Pym & Hu 2022, 57; Macreadie et al. 2025, 275–276). At the same time, community actors displayed pronounced awareness of translation issues in their willingness to correct the situation (Pym & Hu 2022; Karidakis et al. 2022). Gaps in official materials were filled by community associations and individuals who understood community-appropriate communication, and funding flows increasingly favoured information mediation over official translation (Pym & Hu 2022; Karidakis et al. 2022; Meylaerts et al. 2024, 14).

In a systematic review of Finland, Norway, and Sweden, Backholm and Nordberg (2023) conclude that translations into migrant languages increased the accessibility of information but did not resolve cultural obstacles or guarantee the acceptance of the authorities' messages (Backholm & Nordberg 2023, 340). In Norway, Felberg (2022, 133) highlights poor-quality official translations that undermined confidence, while cooperation with respected community representatives helped reach audiences and improved the authorities' knowledge of community needs. Yet sustainability was fragile: volunteers received minimal compensation, and some declined to participate due to the perceived risks, such as being seen as mouthpieces of the authorities (Brekke 2021, 653, 657). Here, appreciation (resourcing) was underdeveloped, even as perception and recognition of translation needs were strong. In Finland, cooperation with migrant communities was embraced accordingly, but without sustainable funding and critical assessment of the actual outreach results (Kuusi et al. 2025).

Against this background, many researchers seem to argue that conventional top-down approaches are insufficient in crisis conditions. This is persuasive, but a critical reading suggests that 'insufficiency' should not compromise structured translation governance as such and can contribute to limited control of translation practices (Meylaerts et al. 2024, 16). The critical assessment dimension thus cuts both ways: scepticism towards official channels can enable agile, community-responsive communication, yet

it can also undermine standards and accountability. Instead, multilingual communication management could include hybrid models that integrate professional standards, clear roles, and quality controls into community co-production. Such a 'bottom-up yet government-led' (Córdoba Serrano 2025, 226) approach was developed in the city of Montreal, Canada, where the public health authority partnered with community organisations and ultimately institutionalised the arrangements in crisis plans.

In addition, existing research indicates that when the usual ways of organising translation are insufficient, an increasing number of actors without formal translation training or qualifications (non-professionals) become involved in mediation (O'Brien & Federici 2020, 130–132, 135; Federici & O'Brien 2019, 11–12, 18). Moreover, paraprofessional translation is often added to the other tasks of bilingual employees to enable flexibility. Raising translation awareness within such a range of actors is a demanding task.

3 Multilingual profile of Finland and Estonia

3.1 Finland

In 2020, Finland had a population of approximately 5.5 million people. Since the Language Act of 1922, Finland has been officially bilingual, with Finnish and Swedish the official state languages. As for the local language regimes, it has been important to collect precise language statistics to determine the municipal language regimes. These regimes depend on the number and proportion of speakers: municipalities may be monolingual Finnish or Swedish-speaking areas or bilingual. In the Sámi-speaking area of Lapland, municipal services are also available in the three Sámi languages spoken in Finland. Most municipalities use Finnish as their official language[1] (Määttä et al. 2022, 4–6; Kinnunen et al. 2025, 8–9).

The three major cities (Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa) of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area are officially bilingual, and municipal services are provided in both Finnish and Swedish. At the end of 2020, the area contained a total population of 1,186,917 inhabitants, out of whom 76.6% spoke Finnish as their first language, 5.2% Swedish, and 18.2% a non-official language. 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%) (Official Statistics of Finland 2021). At the end of 2020, approximately 11% of the population of Finland spoke a foreign first language; however, in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, the share was approximately 20% (Official Statistics of Finland 2021).

Broader immigration to Finland began at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, many migrants have lived in the country for a relatively

short period. Finnish municipalities enjoy considerable autonomy in organising communication with migrant populations and provide some services also in non-official languages. Public service interpreting and translation are widespread in the social and healthcare sectors, where clients enjoy the right to be informed about matters concerning them in a language that they understand.

3.2 Estonia

In 2020, Estonia had a population of approximately 1.33 million people (Statistics Estonia, 2021). Estonian is the sole official language, enshrined in the Language Act (2016), which establishes Estonian as the required language for public administration and official communication, although other languages may be used alongside Estonian within internal administrative contexts. In practice, access to public information presupposes sufficient proficiency in Estonian.

Eighty-four per cent of the Estonian population speaks Estonian – 67% as their first language and 17% as a foreign language (Kersa 2022). Estonia's multilingualism is strongly shaped by Soviet-period immigration, which dramatically altered the country's demographic composition: by the end of the Soviet era, around 40% of the population was Russian-speaking, compared to less than 10% before the 1940s (Jakobson & Kalev 2020; Kalev 2023). Although Estonian language proficiency among non-Estonians has improved over the past decades, recent reporting indicates that approximately 4% of the population does not speak Estonian at all, while a larger proportion (12%) possesses only limited proficiency (Kersa 2024). Notably, 40% of Estonia's Russian-speaking population remains monolingual (Kersa 2022). In addition, new international arrivals – often professionals or students – frequently rely on English for daily life and administrative interactions. Many do not plan long-term residence and therefore hesitate to invest in learning Estonian, especially when they can operate within international or anglophone environments (Soler & Marten 2019). As a result, segments of the population may lack the linguistic resources required to fully understand official communications delivered in Estonian.

4 Data and methods

The data comprise 27 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021–2022 with representatives of 19 public, private, and not-for-profit organisations involved in communicating COVID-19-related information to speakers of non-official languages in Finland and Estonia. In Finland, 18 interviews were conducted with 23 interviewees in 11 organisations; in

Estonia, nine interviews were held with ten interviewees in eight organisations (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2 below). The interviews were conducted in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and Tallinn, but some of the organisations interviewed, though based in the capital region, operated throughout the country. Consequently, we refer to the two datasets as the Finnish and the Estonian data.

Table 4.1 Interviews in Finland

Sector	*Organisation*	*Number of Interviews (Interviewees)*
Municipality	City of Helsinki	3
Municipality	City of Espoo	4 (5)
Municipality	City of Vantaa	2
Public Health Authority	The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare	2 (3)
Higher Education Institution	University of Helsinki	1
Media	Russian news service of the National Broadcasting Service	1 (4)
Business	Confederation of Finnish Construction Industries	1
Business	Construction company	1
NGO	Finnish Red Cross	1
NGO	Migrant association	1
NGO	Migrant association	1

Table 4.2 Interviews in Estonia

Sector	*Organisation*	*Number of Interviews (Interviewees)*
State Governmental Institution	The national crisis portal Kriis.ee of the Government Communication Unit of the Republic of Estonia	1 (2)
Municipality	Tallinn City Office	1
Municipality	Lasnamäe District Government	1
Municipality	Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project	1
NGO	Estonian Refugee Council	1
Higher Education Institution	Tallinn University	1
Business	Viru Keemia Grupp	2
Business	MDC Max Datewyler Eesti	1

Interview questions were devised jointly for both datasets, with a focus on organising multilingual communication in crisis settings. We inquired, for example, about

- the provision of multilingual information during the pandemic
- production and procurement of translations
- sources and formats of information
- dissemination channels
- reception and feedback
- cooperation with other stakeholders
- challenges encountered
- good practices identified

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, Estonian, Russian, and English, and were video- or audio-recorded and transcribed. The Finnish and Estonian datasets were analysed separately, yet the findings were iteratively discussed by the team of researchers during the analysis. All interviews conducted in Finland were analysed in the original language by at least one of the researchers. Interviews conducted in Estonia were analysed in translation, unless conducted in English. The analysis centres slightly more on the Finnish data, due to differences in size and internal variation in the two datasets.

The examples used in this article were translated into English by the authors, unless they originated from an interview conducted in English. When translating quotes from the interviews, the focus was on conveying the content and tone of the excerpt, while minor linguistic details were not reproduced. For ease of reading, the excerpts are segmented into clauses and sentences; non-verbal vocalisations were not transcribed; and filler words and repetitions were removed. [Ellipsis points] mark omitted fragments irrelevant to the topic under discussion. To reinforce anonymity, all interviewees are referred to by the pronoun *she/her* in this chapter.

The Finnish data were previously analysed from the perspectives of the interviewees' perceptions of translation quality (Kuusi et al. 2024), their understanding of their target audiences (Määttä et al. 2024), and the cooperation between public authorities and migrant communities (Kuusi et al. 2025). In the present chapter, we revisit the data from the perspective of the interviewees' and their organisations' translation awareness, focusing on how it affected their communication efforts and comparing strategies adopted in the two countries. Here, a qualitative content analysis approach was adopted (Saldanha & O'Brien 2013, 188–194). Passages reflecting the interviewees' and their organisations' perception, recognition, understanding, appreciation, and critical assessment of translation and translation-related phenomena were identified and categorised

thematically under three interrelated themes that arose from the analysis: the recognition of the need for translation, the organisation and management of translation, and the perceived effects of translation.

5 Analysis: exploring translation awareness

This section analyses how translation (un)awareness is evident in organisations' recognition of the need for translation (Section 5.1), the organisation and management of their translation-related practices (Section 5.2), including production and/or procurement (Section 5.2.1) and quality control (Section 5.2.2), and the perceived effects of translations (Section 5.3).

5.1 Need for translation

In general, organisations in both Finland and Estonia demonstrated awareness of the need for multilingual communication to effectively communicate information on COVID-19. The recognition of this need prompted them to produce or procure translations. Even though most organisations relied on state-produced materials on COVID-19, these were perceived as insufficient, either because they failed to cover all the necessary topics, they were unavailable in all languages relevant to the organisations, or they were considered unsuitable for the target audiences in terms of linguistic accessibility. Consequently, organisations adapted and complemented state-produced materials, demonstrating awareness of their own responsibility to provide information in relevant languages. In addition, it was necessary to develop some materials from scratch, for example, to inform residents about the local organisation of testing facilities, vaccinations, or school reopenings. Multilingual materials were produced mostly by translation; however, some organisations produced materials directly in the target language.

In Finland, many of the organisations interviewed communicated information on COVID-19 in several non-official languages, with the highest number of languages covered by the public health authority (23 non-official languages), the Finnish Red Cross (20 non-official languages), and the municipalities (Helsinki 21, Espoo 17, and Vantaa 7 non-official languages) (for details, see Määttä et al. 2022, 20). Four of the organisations communicated in only one non-official language due to their more narrowly defined audience (the university only in English, the Russian news service only in Russian, and migrant associations in the language of their community). In the Estonian organisations, translations were provided mostly in Russian and/or English. Notably, the need to communicate in English increased during the pandemic. This is reflected in the following example from an interview with the head of communications of Lasnamäe, a Tallinn district with a high percentage of Russian speakers:

(1)
I can't even come up with an example of something not being translated into Russian in our case. What is a fact to be worried about, to some extent, is maybe that the more we look at the numbers, the better we see that there are actually people residing here who are neither Estonian nor Russian speakers.

(Estonia, District Government of Lasnamäe)

By 'neither Estonian nor Russian speakers', the interviewee is referring to 'new migrants' who use English as a lingua franca. Similarly, an interviewee from a municipal project launched to provide more information in English described how the pandemic led to a reassessment of the language groups to be included in crisis communication, pointing out that local-level English communication had been virtually absent before COVID-19. Notably, only one of the Estonian organisations interviewed, the Estonian Refugee Council, communicated in languages other than Estonian, Russian, and English, providing information also in Arabic and Turkish. In interviews with other Estonian organisations, the need to include any additional languages was not discussed. Apparently, residents unable to communicate in Estonian, Russian, or English were largely invisible in crisis communication, suggesting limitations in the organisations' awareness of the need for translation.

In Finland, despite a general awareness of the need for multilingual communication, the organisations' crisis preparedness rarely included an explicit plan for it. This could be partly explained by the lack of instructions on managing multilingual information flows in pre-pandemic crisis communication guidelines (Kinnunen et al. 2025), indicating limited recognition at a policy level. According to the interviews, translation was only mentioned in general terms in crisis communication plans, if at all. For example, the communication manager of a Finnish construction company confirmed that their crisis communication plan did not explicitly recognise the need to translate, although the issue had been discussed even before the pandemic. Such invisibility of translation implies unawareness of the need to explicitly plan and guide multilingual communication as part of crisis preparedness. However, the perceived need to address the issue in the future was presented as one of the lessons learned during the pandemic, demonstrating emerging translation awareness.

In Tallinn, existing emergency plans were mentioned in only three interviews. According to the interviewees, the plans were either outdated or too general and did not incorporate translation as a specific task. In both countries, the analysis shows that even though awareness of the need for translation in crisis communication was high, it had not yet become institutionalised as a defined component of crisis preparedness.

5.2 Organisation and management of translation

5.2.1 Production and procurement of translations

In both Finland and Estonia, translation work was organised through a mix of in-house resources, external services, and ad hoc solutions. The number of target languages used fundamentally influenced the production/procurement of translations in the two countries. In Finland, the inclusion of up to 23 non-official languages rendered it next to impossible for organisations to translate everything in-house. Professional in-house translators worked at some larger organisations (the cities and the university), translating into Swedish and English, but translations into other languages were typically outsourced to translation agencies. Occasionally, language services were also purchased from individual external translators, but these solutions accounted for a very small proportion of the total. Bilingual employees produced translations in most organisations; this was particularly common in the smaller ones (migrant associations and the Russian news service), but it occurred to some extent in the municipalities as well. In Estonia, much of the translation work was performed in-house by bilingual employees. In both countries, most of the bilingual employees involved in translation work were paraprofessional translators in the sense that they possessed no translator education and were not employed as translators in their organisations (Koskela et al. 2017, 466). However, in some cases, it was made explicit that translation was not a task routinely performed by them as part of their regular duties, but rather an ad hoc solution necessitated by the crisis.

In the Finnish public sector organisations, the procurement of translations from external agencies was regulated by framework agreements. In example 2, a communication specialist from one of the municipalities criticises the way public tendering for these agreements was arranged in her organisation.

(2)
We're going to ask that the next time we have a tender round for the framework agreement[...] we'll have both quality and price as the determining factors, because in the past it has only been price. And now we get to the crux of the matter: no wonder the situation [with translation quality] is bad if the city has only been determining who it works with based on price. I mean, you get what you pay for[...]. there may have been wording that 'we're also considering quality', but if you think about the people who carried out the negotiations, none of them were translators[...]. they're not people that know anything about language services, and they're not translators themselves.

(Finland, municipal organisation)

The interviewee points out that even if quality was included in the wording of the agreement, it wasn't evident in the results. In other words, talk does not correspond to action, and the interviewee expresses her frustration over it. Furthermore, she criticises the tendering process for not involving translators or other language experts, implying that they are better equipped to assess the quality of translation services. The example suggests that while the interviewee is acutely aware of the importance of already considering quality when tendering for translation services, institutional awareness of the issue in her organisation might be relatively low. Interestingly, tendering practices were not discussed in the other interviews. This could be explained by differences in the interviewees' professional background: unlike most communication specialists interviewed, this particular interviewee was an experienced translator and may therefore have been more sensitised to – and thus more aware of – issues with her organisation's translation procurement.

In most organisations, the practice of bilingual employees acting as ad hoc translators was not questioned or challenged. In the cities, some interviewees pointed out that under normal circumstances, these employees could not be assigned translation tasks, as they were responsible for performing their regular work as well. It is noteworthy that these reservations were mostly related to the availability of bilingual employees in terms of time allocation. Even though some interviewees specifically highlighted their preference for professional translators, it seems that, in general, language skills were equated with translation skills, suggesting little appreciation for professional translation competencies.

Machine translation (MT) was openly discussed in only a few interviews. For example, an interviewee representing the public health authority highlighted the importance of checking MT output into migrant languages before publication, thus displaying an understanding of the potential problems inherent in using free online MT.

In Estonia, the government's main crisis portal, Kriis.ee, operated with a clear principle of parallel trilingual communication and relied on a group of professional in-house translators familiar with both the subject matter and the institutional context. In other organisations, multilingual communication relied heavily on bilingual staff, who balanced translation tasks with other responsibilities. Typically, translations were handled entirely by communication staff without formal translator education and institutionalised resources:

(3)
We have neither specific glossaries nor databases. All the translations are proofread by communications staff. Nobody has translation-related education, but we manage.

(Estonia, Viru Keemia)

The example suggests a perception of translation as a task that can be handled without formal education and any specific tools or resources. Elsewhere, the interviewee mentions that the organisation resorts to external translators only for longer texts, explaining the need for professional translation through time constraints: bilingual staff lack the time to translate extensive texts. The focus seems to be on organising multilingual workflows with existing resources, with translation competence approached as a combination of appropriate language skills and time allocation. Similar tendencies were present in other interviews as well. The only organisation translating into languages other than Russian and English, the Estonian Refugee Council, managed translation work with the help of volunteers, bilingual staff, and, for Turkish translations, an external translator.

In Estonia, machine translation was mentioned twice as a practical tool, especially when time and resources were limited. In one case, free online MT was recommended as a pragmatic solution in crisis conditions. More developed MT literacy was displayed by an interviewee describing the use of MT in combination with human revision for simpler texts intended for internal communication, where minor errors were considered acceptable.

5.2.2 Quality control and revision practices

In Finland, translation quality assurance was managed in a variety of ways, reflecting both the resources available and the actors' awareness of the need for quality control. Typically, the interviewees referred to the practice of 'checking' translations without explicitly stating what exactly was involved (e.g., proofreading or translation revision). Some interviewees mentioned that translation revision by a person other than the translator was included in the translation services produced in-house or procured from the agencies; some stated that they were unaware of whether quality control was included in the services of the contracted agency. In larger organisations, translations from agencies were often checked by bilingual employees or representatives of migrant associations. In example 4, an interviewee from one of the municipalities describes becoming aware of the importance of checking these translations within the organisation and the need for a specified member of staff to perform this task.

(4)
We noticed that it's really important that someone from the organisation goes through the translation. But they're so incredibly busy with their own tasks, so it was like juggling; you needed to prioritise which ones you absolutely needed to check, and I tried to pass on the message that we should establish a procedure for this, that there should be a designated person at least for Arabic and Somali to check translations.

> Talking about information on COVID-19, it's really important to have it all correct.
>
> (Finland, municipal organisation)

The interviewee underlines the importance of establishing a procedure for quality control to ensure the correctness of translated information, displaying not only awareness of the unwanted effects that low quality might cause, but also willingness to act and change the existing procedures. At the same time, she finds it challenging to allocate revision tasks to colleagues managing an already heavy workload. This widespread practice, described by an interviewee as a 'band-aid solution', was questioned by three interviewees, who highlighted the need for professional competencies for a reliable assessment of translation quality, thus demonstrating awareness of the complexities of translation and translation revision. In addition to assigning revision tasks to their multilingual employees, organisations turned to migrant associations for feedback on translated materials (see also Section 5.3). In some individual instances, the interviewees reported checking translations into languages they did not know by back-translating them into Finnish with the help of free online MT.

The quality of translations procured from translation agencies was criticised in several interviews (see also Kuusi et al. 2024). In example 2 above, the interviewee relates these quality issues to her organisation's procurement practices. In the interviews with a migrant association and the Finnish Red Cross, the interviewees explained these problems by the tendency of translation agencies to use untrained translators, pointing out that 'practically anyone can end up doing translations for the agencies' (the Finnish Red Cross). Admittedly, there is no translator training available in many migrant languages in Finland; nevertheless, quality issues were also reported in languages in which university-level translator education is offered, such as Russian or English. Moreover, if public tendering for translation services was based on price, as suggested in example 2, the contracted agencies might have favoured subcontractors based on the lowest price as well, thus limiting the availability of trained professionals. Interestingly, issues with translations procured from agencies surfaced in interviews with the public sector rather than the private sector, which also (partly) relied on translation agencies. This could be tentatively explained by the fact that private sector organisations were not restricted by national procurement legislation, which encourages public organisations to favour service providers based on the lowest price. Therefore, they could base their choice of agency on other criteria. Alternatively, their satisfaction with the translation quality may stem from the organisations' lack of internal quality control.

In both Finland and Estonia, several interviewees highlighted the benefits of working with an in-house translator or designated external translator familiar with the terminology, subject matter, and target audiences. The quality of translations was perceived as good when the organisation had reliable contacts or long-standing collaboration with specific translators. In Finland, this extended to quality control as well: some interviewees reported having compiled a pool of reliable people from their staff or migrant associations to check translations into their native languages.

Sometimes, differing conceptions of translation quality caused friction among the actors involved. Example 5 presents a quote from an interviewee with a background in professional translation, responsible for editing the English-language texts on the city's website. The interviewee wanted to edit an English translation of a text on vaccinations already published on the website of one of the municipality's divisions before vaccinations for younger age groups began, as the site would attract more readers at that point. She requested editing rights to the specific webpage, but they were not granted.

(5)
If I could get the rights, I could go there and tidy it [the English translation] up a bit[...]. I would not change the content, just the language so that it would be readable and[...] maybe I would add[...] that 'the vaccination is safe and by getting it you will help keep yourself and all the people you love safe'. Something like that right at the very beginning, because in international circles, it's very important, and it should have been said first here. So, I would have made changes like this, and then their boss called, the head of communications, and [asked] whether there were any errors in it [the translation]. I said well no errors, but the language is clunky, and it's not very client-friendly, and I would make some small changes that you wouldn't even notice[...] but he said if there are no errors, you won't go there.

(Finland, municipal organisation)

The interviewee's wish to improve the language and style and adjust the opening lines of the text demonstrates her awareness of the importance of considering the target audience to ensure the functional adequacy of the text. However, at the level of management, this awareness was lacking; only obvious errors were to be corrected, which points to a perception of translation as a mechanistic transfer rather than communication between linguistic and textual cultures, and, consequently, to a rather limited conception of translation quality. This also highlights a discrepancy in the organisation's approach to translation quality assurance: while employing

non-professionals to check translations was generally accepted, in this case, the assistance of a professional hired to maintain language quality was rejected.

In Estonia, quality assurance practices were often informal, but increasing awareness was shown of how translation choices could affect comprehensibility and reception. State-issued translations were edited by bilingual staff in both the public and private sectors to ensure the naturalness of language and meet the expectations of the target audiences. Several interviewees commented on the complexity of state regulations and the need to simplify them linguistically before they could be passed on to their audiences. This indicates awareness that translation involves not only transferring content but also adjusting complexity, terminology, and style to ensure accessibility.

Criticism of translation quality in the Estonian interviews was aimed at state-issued translations, while the quality of translations produced by bilingual staff or procured from external translators was not discussed. Apparently, the quality of these translations was trusted and never tested, indicating limitations in the critical assessment dimension of translation awareness. Notably, criticism was directed at Russian translations, while English translations were accepted as they were. This might have resulted from the prevalence of Russian language skills among the interviewees (and Estonians in general), rendering it easier to assess translations into Russian. The only exception was provided by the Estonian Refugee Council – the only organisation translating into languages other than Russian and English – where the interviewee highlighted the difficulty of evaluating the quality of translations.

In general, the lack of a critical attitude towards translations produced by bilingual staff might stem from general contentment with an arrangement that allowed organisations to manage multilingual communication without much need to turn to external (sometimes costly) services. As an interviewee from the Lasnämae municipality pointed out, translation quality is always linked to broader organisational factors, including human resources and available time. Hence, the practices reported in the interviews show practical awareness of the affordances of available resources; nonetheless, they also highlight gaps in institutional support for and understanding of translation competencies and resources.

5.3 Effects of translation

The actors' awareness of the need for translation, discussed in Section 5.1, suggests recognition of at least some of its (real or potential) effects: it is precisely the understanding of the unwanted consequences of non-translation

that promotes recognition of the need for translation. However, in the Finnish data, the effects of non-translation were not explicitly discussed; the need for multilingual communication was generally taken for granted at the time the interviews were conducted. By contrast, the effects of inadequate translation quality, such as producing misunderstandings or undermining trust, were repeatedly highlighted (see also Kuusi et al. 2024, 83–85). However, the interviewees' awareness of these effects varied. Example 6, from an interview with the public health authority, is taken from a context in which the interviewee discusses the importance of using multiple channels for delivering information to reach migrant audiences:

(6)
Translations, in principle, are not a problem here at all, I think. Translations can be bought; it's more about how to get the message across to these different groups.

(Finland, public health authority)

While recognising the need for translation, the interviewee seems to perceive translations as an unproblematic commodity that does not contribute to 'getting the message across'. This implies an understanding of translation as the mechanistic transfer of content with little awareness of how the linguistic quality of translations, their acceptability, and appropriateness influence the reception of the message.

In an interview with a communication specialist from the Finnish Red Cross, we hear a different account of the translations procured by this public health authority.

(7)
Well, we are using one big translation agency, THL [the public health authority] is using another one[...]. And let's say that both produce completely random results. I have actually been proofreading the Estonian translations ordered by THL for almost a year, and [shaking her head], well, when there's a sentence saying that the COVID-19 vaccine can give pregnant women COVID-19 [laughing] and things like that, well[...]. Sometimes they're ok, but in almost every text there's something, something small has gone wrong and then that small thing can be quite big actually.

(Finland, Finnish Red Cross)

In the excerpt, the interviewee offers an example of a mistranslation that could potentially strengthen vaccine scepticism among the intended audience, thus seriously compromising the communication. The interviewee describes the flaws encountered in translations as small yet not unimportant, referring to their effects. Similar views on the translations of this

public health authority are found in the two interviews with representatives of migrant associations. One of them, discussing checking these translations into Russian, describes their initial quality as 'awful', calling them 'a technical collection of words', and concluding that if they offered such translations, 'people simply wouldn't trust this source of information' (see also Kuusi et al. 2025: 57). The other interviewee criticises translations provided by the public health authority into Somali for excessive literalness or 'translating word for word' and the subsequent loss of the actual meaning of the message.

These conflicting accounts suggest differing understandings of the effects of translation. In example 6, the focus seems to be on the delivery instead of the deliverable. When contrasted with example 7 and the accounts provided by migrant associations, it points to unawareness of the potential of translation quality to influence reception. However, when interpreting example 6, it should be borne in mind that the organisation had nonetheless approached representatives of migrant communities for feedback on their translations, thus suggesting awareness of the role of translation quality. Although the opinions expressed by migrant participants may require critical examination (Pym et al. 2022, 116; Meylaerts et al. 2024, 16), the criticism they express is in line with the general trend among the interviewees, who question the quality of the translations produced by agencies.

In Tallinn, the interviewees repeatedly linked the effects of multilingual communication to issues of trust in institutions. Inconsistent or contradictory messaging, regardless of the language, was seen as a key factor that could undermine public confidence. The fact that state-issued translations were edited in organisations to avoid non-natural language signalled concern about the potential effect of quality issues on reception.

Delays in translation provision emerged as a crucial factor affecting the reception of information. At a university level, the expectation that Estonian and English audiences receive information simultaneously was seen as essential for maintaining trust and a sense of inclusion. It was necessary to issue major updates on the same day in both languages precisely to avoid perceptions of unequal treatment:

(8)
When we send out a major new guideline or new information, we have to send it out in both languages on the same day. We can't wait for the weekend to go by and then start to translate it into English because the international community will know we have sent something out, obviously, honestly, and they would feel bad. And I get why they would feel bad. I would feel bad, too. So, translating everything is the main thing that I try to keep in mind.

(Estonia, Tallinn University)

In essence, delays could be perceived as non-translation by those still waiting for information when others had already received it, creating feelings of exclusion that could potentially lead to broader distrust in the authorities. However, even though several interviewees emphasised the importance of translated information to avoid feelings of exclusion and inequality, the political dimension of (non-)translation into Russian was not discussed in the interviews.

Finally, the interviewees highlighted that the crisis had provided lessons on the role of clear multilingual messaging in building trust between institutions and citizens. For example, an interviewee from Tallinn City Office pointed out that 'such situations [as the COVID-19 pandemic] create trust between citizens and institutions when the communication is done right'. Likewise, an interviewee from a Finnish municipality emphasised that without the lessons learned during COVID-19, organisations would not have been as well prepared for the flood of refugees from Ukraine. These reflections indicate that, despite initial gaps and instances of mistrust, the pandemic also triggered processes of institutional learning that increased translation awareness and opened up discussions on ways to better support multilingual crisis communication.

6 Discussion and conclusions

In the analysis, translation awareness was approached as the perception, recognition, understanding, appreciation, and critical assessment of translation-related phenomena identified in the interviewees' accounts of their organisations' translation practices in multilingual COVID-19 communication.

The analysis shows that organisations in both Finland and Estonia were well aware of the need for translation in crisis communication; however, in their emergency or crisis communication plans, translation and interpreting were only mentioned in passing, if at all. This indicates the perception of translation as a fairly straightforward task that can be managed in organisations without explicit guidance at a policy level (see also Kinnunen et al. 2025, 9–12).

In terms of the organisation and management of translation, the approaches adopted in the two countries differed. In Finland, organisations strove to include a wide range of the most spoken migrant languages, whereas in Estonia translations were mostly provided in Russian and English. Taking into consideration the migration patterns of the two countries, this is understandable, but it also points to differences in the scope of awareness of the need for translation.

In Finland, the majority of translations were outsourced to translation agencies, as in-house translators (when available) translated only into

English and Swedish. Paraprofessional translation by bilingual employees was not uncommon, even though the importance of using professional translators was highlighted in some of the interviews. Translation revision was either included in the services of translation agencies or assigned to bilingual employees or contacts from migrant communities. In Estonia, paraprofessional translation was the principal mode of producing and checking translations, while external professional translation services were used when bilingual staff lacked the time to translate all the material required. The prevalence of paraprofessional translation in both datasets suggests an understanding of translation as a skill possessed by any bilingual (Harris & Sherwood 1978) and a lack of appreciation of professional translation competencies. As observed in research on language support for migrants in non-crisis settings, the combination of para-, non-, and professional translation in organisations does not seem to be a practice arising from any formal policy; rather, it is a solution emerging organically as a response to actual needs and sometimes limited resources (Tipton 2017, 50).

While many participants discussed the role of translation quality in eliciting trust and prompting the desired behaviour, there were also instances pointing to a mechanistic understanding of translation and limited awareness of the effects of translation quality. In Finland, some of the interviewees expressed critical views on their organisation's translation practices, such as the use of para- and non-professional translators; moreover, quality issues with outsourced translation services were a recurring topic in the interviews. Paraprofessional translation revision, however, was discussed as potentially problematic in only a few individual instances. In Estonia, issues with outsourced translations were not reported, paraprofessional translation was not problematised, and the importance of professional translation competencies was not discussed in the interviews. Strong reliance on paraprofessional practices, enabled by the narrow selection of languages and a widespread command of Russian, was perceived as a natural way to allocate resources during a crisis. A critical tone was adopted mainly when the quality of government messages, often regarded as unapproachable, was discussed.

In Finland, cooperation with migrant associations was unanimously praised as an important lesson learned during the crisis, allowing organisations to ensure the linguistic and cultural acceptability of their messages. This aligns with previous research on multilingual COVID-19 communications, emphasising the importance of community participation in order to elicit trust. However, despite the indisputable benefits of this approach, it could also be subjected to critical examination. The potential drawbacks of the approach in our data are discussed in Kuusi et al. (2025) and, in an Australian context, in Pym et al. (2022). Additionally, the distinction

between 'official' (procured by public authorities) and community-produced translations was obscured by the participants' claims that translations from the authorities, procured from translation agencies, were likely to have been produced by non-professional translators (cf. Pym et al. 2022 on governmental bodies using NAATI-certified translators in Australia).

On the whole, Finnish organisations showed limited awareness of the need for professional translation management in terms of procurement practices or the inherent discrepancy between claiming to favour professional translation and relying partly on para- and non-professional translation and translation revision. In our view, although it might be necessary for organisations to resort to ad hoc solutions and engage with migrant communities to elicit trust, they would benefit from developing their own capacity to organise and manage multilingual communication. Criticism from inside the organisation, indicating potential weak spots in the system, should be given careful consideration.

The lessons learned during COVID-19 in Finland and Estonia included a growing understanding of the importance of timely, accurate, and culturally acceptable translations for creating trust in public health communication. This can be considered a clear indication of translation awareness. The enhancement and refinement of this awareness is crucial for further development of organisational practices, as translation awareness enables change: when individuals become aware of the various dimensions of translation, they gain the ability to modify their actions. Further, the comparison between translation practices in Finland and Estonia suggests that when the volume of translation activity (in terms of the selection of languages) grows, multilingual communication calls for more systematic and informed translation management. Consequently, raising translation awareness is crucial not only at an individual but also at an institutional level, where organisations plan, manage, and assess their multilingual communications.

Our analysis aligns with previous research that points to the need for commitments that mandate the management of multilingualism as a core function in crisis communication. Further understanding and critical assessment of workflows, role delineation between non-, para-, and professional translation, procurement frameworks, and translation quality are necessary, too. In short, translation awareness is not achieved by noticing needs alone; instead, it requires a change in operational understanding and a critical assessment of the practices, management, and effects of translation.

Note

1 Finnish is the majority language in 259 out of 308 municipalities.

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