ITD-Conference 2015. Sustainability and health, emerging topics and new challenges for inter- and transdisciplinary research. Basel (Switzerland), 8-10 September 2015

Ebolang: the lasting challenge of an epidemic in multilingual Africa

T. Bearth. Institute for Comparative Linguistics (University of Zurich)
African Languages Consultancy (Spreitenbach).

Recent epidemics history has demonstrated the dependency of remote populations on global capacities for intervention, but also, inversely, the vulnerability of the system of global health to fallacies in local resilience. Global welfare depends not only on access to health services of poorer regions but, concurrently, on equal access of their inhabitants to key knowledge pertaining to prevention and case management and, poverty being diagnosed as a hotbed for health hazards (Chan 2014), on awareness of economic and social consequences of major health incidents. The WHO's guide on "Outbreak communication" insists that communication must be inclusive and participatory: "total engagement of affected communities [is] the key to control" (2005: 16).

A workshop on the role of local languages in fighting Ebola in Western Ivory Coast, co-sponsored by the Swiss Research Center (CSRS), at the height of the threat in October 2014 near the border of two countries hardest hit by the endemic, united 30+ linguists, social anthropologists, health workers and local resource persons around the hypothesis that those most directly exposed to the threat – doubly vulnerable due to deficits of consolidated knowledge and also of arguments to counter syncretic interpretations emanating from their midst, and moreover unjustly stigmatized as a "threat from the jungle" (NZZ, 6 Nov. 2014**) –** would be, if provided with full access to information in their languages, a strategic human asset in the fight against it.

Participants agreed on:

(I) the need for historically exoglossic models of communication to be complemented, in a multilingual milieu still largely privileging endoglossy, by pluralistic strategies for stabilizing relevant knowledge, ensuring its permanent reproducibility in local languages and thus reducing communicative dependency of less privileged local actors exposed to high risk;

(ii) the key role of local languages (a) as an epistemic tool for "understanding how people understand" (WHO guide, French version, 2008: 5); (b) as a creative resource for the elaboration of indigenous terminologies (e.g. virus, infection); (c) as a workplace for the collaborative exploration of resources for practical purposes (documented by flyers jointly elaborated in five local languages and tested in a 4-step validation cycle involving all relevant categories of participants); (d) as an agreed focus of further cooperation with health authorities.

One of Ebola's lasting challenges will be met in making crisis communication sustainable and extending full benefits of knowledge-based society's prerogatives to those still deprived of them.

Chan, Margaret, 2014. Ebola Virus Disease in West Africa – No Early End to the Outbreak. The New England Journal of Medecine (NEJM), 371/13. 1183-1185. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp140985

OMS 2008. Guide de l'OMS sur la planification de la communication lors des flambées de maladies. Genève: OMS