


## Chapter 9

# Public Health Communication and Language Policy at Rhodes University During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic offered unprecedented obstacles to public health communication worldwide. Pandemic revealed disparities and significant gaps in access to public health information for those not proficient in English, potentially leading to the exclusion of indigenous language speakers and minority communities from issues of national interest, including vital COVID-19 updates. This chapter examines the case study of Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and explores the institution's language policies and practices during the pandemic. The institution grapples with linguistic diversity, where English is the primary language of teaching and administration. The study explores language, public health communication, and inclusion at Rhodes University. It seeks to find linguistic and cultural contestations during this time by evaluating the university's response to the pandemic through language. The study uses document analysis to understand how Rhodes University's language practices impacted public health communication during the pandemic.*

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, disrupted lives, economies, and healthcare systems worldwide. The unprecedented crisis underscored the vital role of effective communication in

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public health, as timely and accurate information became a critical tool in managing the spread of the virus and mitigating its impact. Language, a cornerstone of communication, was central to disseminating essential health information, ensuring understanding, and fostering community engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the landscape of global health communication, prompting swift and far-reaching responses from governments, organizations, and educational institutions worldwide. Among these, universities faced unique challenges in ensuring the safety and well-being of their campus communities while continuing their core mission of education and research. Public health communication, language choices, and policy were at a crossroads during the unprecedented crisis.

In the wake of the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed a profound transformation in how societies communicated, shared information, and responded to public health crises. At the heart of this transformation lay the crucial intersection of public health communication and language practices – a dynamic and multifaced nexus that demanded innovative strategies, adaptability, and sensitivity to navigate effectively.

Language, as both a medium of communication and a bearer of cultural nuances, plays a central role in the effectiveness of public health communication efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions worldwide were confronted with the critical task of crafting appropriate health messages but also ensuring these messages were understood by diverse linguistic and cultural communities.

However, we live in a world where global public communication is conducted only through a few world languages. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed serious challenges with multilingual communication. During the pandemic, the world experienced a large-scale exclusion of minorities from timely, high-quality information (Piller et al., 2020). This was mainly due to the “dominance of English-centric global mass communication; the longstanding devaluation of minorized languages; and the failure to consider the importance of multilingual repertoires for building trust and resilient communities” (Piller et al., 2020, p. 503).

This chapter delves into unique and insightful issues of public health communication, language practices, and language policies at Rhodes University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the halls of Rhodes University, situated in the picturesque town of Makhanda, South Africa, a microcosm of the global challenges emerged. The pandemic forced academic institutions like Rhodes to grapple with multifarious public health communication, language practices, and language policy issues.

This chapter examines the nuanced interplay between public health strategies, language choices, and language policy at Rhodes University, comprehensively exploring the challenges, responses, and lessons learned. The chapter illuminates the complex issues surrounding multilingualism, cultural context, educational equity, effective communication of health information, and the university’s language policy. Moreover, it underscores the place of indigenous languages in communication and health information during the pandemic in the South African higher education landscape.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Which language(s) did Rhodes University use to communicate its COVID-19 messages with the university community?
2. How did Rhodes University’s language usage impact the university’s language policy?
3. What are the potential implications of the university communications’ strategies on indigenous languages?

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