

Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis

A Study on the Multitude of Languages and Comprehension of
Material Provided to Refugees and Migrants in Greece

Executive Summary



In April 2017, **Translators without Borders**, in partnership with **Save the Children**, set out to analyze the language and communication barriers that exist in the context of the ongoing humanitarian migration crisis in Greece. The study explored whether the information provided to refugees and migrants in Greece is effective when measured against four key criteria: accessibility, readability, comprehensibility and usefulness. The research also recorded language and communication preferences among the refugee and migrant population.

The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods and was carried out in April 2017, at 11 sites in Greece. The findings are based on 202 surveys with refugees and migrants, and 22 interviews with humanitarian aid workers. The surveys and interviews were conducted in **Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Greek and English**. The findings, while not exhaustive, do pinpoint a number of important language and communication issues that are of importance for the management of the humanitarian situation as a whole.

Key findings

The language in which information is provided is of critical importance.

The vast majority of respondents would prefer to receive information in their mother tongue; where that is not possible, English is not seen as an adequate alternative in most cases. Eighty-eight percent of participants preferred to receive information in their mother tongue. Speakers of “minority” languages such as Sorani, Baluchi and Lingala do not receive sufficient information in Greece, as there are not enough interpreters or cultural mediators for these languages.

90%

of participants couldn't understand spoken or written English

Findings show that comprehension testing can aid communication by clarifying levels of understanding between some of the main languages of refugees and migrants in Greece.

Interviews and background research conducted for this study highlighted that a significant number of Farsi and Dari speakers can understand each other, although Farsi speakers might understand less Dari. Native speakers of the Kurdish dialects Kurmanji and Sorani are less likely to understand each other's languages, but more likely to understand a third language, such as Arabic. Some Kurmanji and Sorani speakers would prefer to receive written information in Arabic, as they were not taught to read or write in their mother tongue. This information had not previously been available to the majority of the humanitarian aid workers interviewed.

88%

of respondents preferred to receive information in their mother tongue

Literacy and education levels, which vary across the refugee and migrant population, are a significant factor in comprehension.

Of the 202 participants interviewed, 24 percent had received no schooling at all, 47 percent had some schooling but no diploma, and 29 percent had obtained a high school diploma or more.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents claimed to understand written information in their language; but only 44 percent of them were able to answer basic questions on the information they were given. This implies that written information in the right language is comprehended by less than half of the target audience; to reach the rest, verbal, graphic and audio-visual content is needed.

Almost two-thirds of refugees and migrants surveyed wanted more information than they were currently receiving, with a strong preference for written documents (even given literacy challenges). This finding is in contrast to the fact that most information within the surveyed sites is shared by word of mouth. Furthermore, 64 percent of respondents voiced a need for more information on a range of topics, including: general information about their stay in Greece, asylum procedures, medical and healthcare, housing options outside camps, education for children, language lessons for both children and adults, and family reunification procedures. The one-third of respondents who did not want more information also often reported feeling a lack of trust towards aid organizations and government authorities.

60%

of respondents stated that they currently receive information primarily by word of mouth

Issues identified by humanitarian aid workers interviewed indicate that language presents one of the main obstacles to effectiveness in their work with refugees and migrants. Humanitarian aid workers rely heavily on the assistance of an interpreter or cultural mediator to communicate with refugees and migrants, yet they frequently

lack a trained language professional with the right language combination to support them in their daily work and at times fall back on asking a child to interpret. Moreover, the majority of the humanitarian aid workers interviewed were not sufficiently informed about the origin of and the nuances between certain languages, limiting their ability to seek the appropriate support for communicating with the refugees and migrants they aim to assist.

56%

could not answer basic questions on written information even when it was provided in their mother tongue



TEST YOUR INFORMATION

Don't rely exclusively on self-reported metrics of comprehension or literacy. 85% of our respondents said they could understand written content in their own language but our testing found only 44% could.

DESIGN TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Simplify the content, use graphics, be concise, and make sure the text is large enough to read.



Key recommendations

To meet the needs of the individuals and families caught up in this crisis, service providers should communicate with those affected in a language and a manner that is accessible, comprehensible and useful. Ensuring aid organizations and public services are adequately equipped and supported to communicate better with affected communities should be a greater focus of the response than it has been to date. To that end:

1. Information on the languages of the affected population must be available to responders.

Data on mother tongue and literacy levels should be collected within wider demographic assessments and made publicly available. Staff members of humanitarian organizations and government authorities who interact with refugees and migrants should be better informed about the various languages people speak, the origin of those languages and how far speakers of one language or dialect can understand one another. One way of doing that is through factsheets on relevant languages: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/>

2. To be effective for the target population, information dissemination must be accessible, readable, comprehensible, useful and trustworthy.

In practice, this means content should be contextualized and simplified for the target audiences. More information should be made available in “minority” languages and should be easily accessible. The information provided should be consistent and trustworthy and the content should be relevant and useful to the intended audience.

Interpreters and cultural mediators should be selected on the basis not only of the language but also of the dialect they are requested to interpret from and into. Care should be taken to ensure that the selected interpreter or cultural mediator is not from an ethnic group toward which the refugee or migrant might feel hostility or distrust. Capacity building, including terminology support and training in the practice and ethics of intercultural communication with potentially vulnerable individuals, should be provided for interpreters, cultural mediators, translators and their supervisors within government services and humanitarian organizations.

The study was carried out as part of TWB's Words of Relief crisis relief program in Greece. The complete study, and other research products, such as the language factsheets, are available at: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/>