

## Technical Communication for Migrant Illiterates

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*International migration has existed throughout human history, but has taken a new weight in today's world with the impact of globalisation and what is often referred to as the "refugee crisis". The aim of this paper is not to discuss the motives or the impact of migration but to observe how language and literacy barriers compound the difficulties met by vulnerable populations in modern information-oriented societies, and how these issues are addressed by the many organizations that fight to improve the situation of migrants.*

*Here, we address how barriers to information access worsen refugees' situations and identify technical-communication-related issues in how information is delivered as of today. Is there a case for technical communication in ensuring the respect of human rights?*

**Keywords : technical communication, language barriers, refugees, human rights, information**

## Introduction

International migrations are an important reality in today's world. In particular the many economic, political and environmental crises around the world have resulted in large inflows of refugees from less developed countries to OECD countries.

Due to the circumstances of their decision to migrate, these refugees are often poorly prepared for integration in the host country and frequently face major hurdles caused by their inability to either understand and/or read the local language.

Faced with limited resources or willingness from governmental agencies, many already existing and new organizations have taken matters into their own hands and make use of their own resources and skills to help refugees.

Linguistic necessities have brought translators and other language experts to participate in this effort, but what about technical writers? A core need of new arrivants is the ability to understand transportation indications, administrative documents, street signs... all documents to which the principles of Technical Communication apply. Ways to communicate without writing already exist, such as videos, face-to-face training, or nonverbal pictograms and diagrams, but there is so little material that fits refugees' needs.

How can these people hope to adapt in a new country if they permanently need help to understand every detail? What are the limits of

technical communication in this particular field? What can technical writers bring to the fight for human rights?

We will begin by explaining how we defined the terms of our research and accordingly reduced its scope to the case of refugees. We will discuss the insights from relevant papers written by international organizations, then present our method of stakeholder interviews, including communication and technical communication professionals as well as volunteers from organisations that help refugees. We will conclude by discussing how the results of these interviews provide insights for technical communication.

## ***Defining Literacy***

Our first working title was “Technical Communication for Those Who Cannot Read”. But when it came to defining who were “those who cannot read”, we realized that it was more complex than expected. In fact the topic was so broad that we decided to focus on the case of refugees, for whom illiteracy is a major hurdle to integration in the host country.

The OECD identifies three different dimensions for literacy in the modern world: mathematical, scientific and reading literacy. It defines the latter as *“the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”*

Within reading literacy, the OECD further distinguishes between prose literacy (*“The knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks, i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous text including editorials, news stories, brochures, and instructional materials”*) and document literacy (*“the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts”*). This second aspect is particularly relevant for technical communication.

But defining literacy is not a simple matter of sorting between literate people on one side and illiterates on the other. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) distinguishes five levels of literacy where level three is “considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of

everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society". For the purpose of this article, we decided to focus on people identified as level one or two.

Obviously, it is important to remember that for a given individual the level of literacy will vary from one language to another, especially in the context of migration where one's mother tongue is not always used in the country of residency. Some may be able to read in their mother tongue, in english or in another language and some may not be able to read at all.

## **Literature Review**

To prepare for our research, we relied on reports from organizations engaged in the migrant crises and tackling the specific issue of language barriers. The publications from Translators Without Borders (TWB) were particularly helpful in extending our views on the points which we discussed with the french refugee organizations.

TWB builds upon the idea that migrants and refugees have needs that are not always considered, the primary one being their need to access information. From being able to access assistance to knowing the risks associated with a crisis, access to information is a critical need for every human being including refugees.

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”*

*- Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Through its research, TWB identified major flaws of how organizations deal with migration crises. In its reports, the humanitarian and non-profit translation organization not only identifies the problems faced by refugees and migrants but also exposes best practices to handle the situation and means to improve the current methods.

## **Conceptual framework**

Their analysis of the many elements that can lead to a failure of understanding is summed up as follows: *“To be accessible, information*

*must be in a **language** and **format** the intended audience understands. It must also be presented in a way that is **relevant** to them, and available in a **channel** to which they have access”.*

First, **language**. In its report entitled “Putting Language on the Map in the European Refugee Response”, TWB highlights how critical and frequently misunderstood this issue is.

According to TWB, the perfect information delivery is provided as a written document in the recipient’s mother tongue. But the absence of concrete knowledge of the languages spoken and understood by the migrants leads organizations to make faulty generalizations, for instance by assuming that the person helped is fluent in his home country’s official language. As an illustration, in Nigeria *“Although English is a national language [of Nigeria], it is rarely a migrant’s mother tongue and many Nigerians with lower education levels have only basic English skills”.*

Failure to take this issue into account may lead to a failure to properly address the needs of all recipients. In its report, TWB advocates for an “assessment-based data collection approach” to mend this gap. Finding someone able to deliver the relevant information in each language is tough which explains the use of languages like english, french or arabic. Though it is common, this solution is not ideal. TWB proposes alternative solutions such as plain english or transcreation as ways to alleviate this issue.

Then comes **format**. Since it is the first thing that a human being sees, it must be clear and accessible. A document that is easy to read and pleasant to the eye will be more effective than a document that is dark, messy and unorganized, even for people who cannot actually read what is written. Indeed, through their research in Greece, TWB found that

*“individuals with no formal schooling can be twice as likely to understand a simple infographic as a written text containing the same information. Even less literate people prefer physical documents”.*

Physical documents are also very important for migrants and refugees. Why do people prefer physical written documents? It is very simple. A physical written document such as a flyer or a user guide is reassuring. A physical document is a *“relatively permanent format [that] ensures they can refer back to the content and ask others to read it to them”*. That way, they have a solid reference, something they can rely on.

Closely bound to format is obviously **content**. An appropriate content is as important as a clear format since this is what people are looking for. What is an appropriate content? An appropriate content must be useful to the reader. The information must be reachable and adjusted to the audience. Following the results of TWB’s research in Greece, refugees are sometimes given documents that are inappropriate and unadapted to their needs. Some may receive complex document that they don’t understand, others may not receive anything at all. Consequently, charity and organizations that work with refugees need to provide simple documents that are easy to understand especially to children, but also to less literate people and second-language speakers.

Last but not least: **channels**. The solutions used to bring the necessary information to the people who cannot read can themselves become an obstacle if the recipients’ situation is not properly taken into account. A case in point is information access through mobile devices, which is often highly effective but which may also be a barrier for some populations due to financial and technological considerations but also potentially due to socio-cultural factors. Women, elderly and poorer people are often left out

from those who can access instructions via mobile applications, social medias, helplines, hotlines and call centers, and are further relegated to the margins. *“As in any population, those with power and resources can access information and make their voices heard”* writes TWB, confirming the idea that stakeholders must take into account the diversity of ethnies that refugees come from and find a channel that will offer them power, visibility and autonomy.

## **Recommendations**

In its paper “Information Without Understanding, Rights Without Meaning” written for the United Nations’ Global Compact Initiative, TWB proposes a list of practical solutions to the main issues that came out in its research: language, format, content and channel.

- **Pay more attention to language in humanitarian action**

History has shown that after any disaster, language is a determining factor for helping refugees and migrants by giving them instructions. Not speaking the right language is troublesome in a crisis situation. The effects that stem from the crisis, such as loss of internet and global communication systems or even the wrong instructions and the spread of misinformation (for instance, by people smugglers) can make communication with people challenging (Communicate effectively with migrants, MICIC).

- **Improve data on the languages of refugees and migrants**

Given that the humanitarian sector is confronted to the language barrier all the time, it also lacks staff and people that can speak the different languages of refugees. The issue is that collaborators don’t have enough data on languages that refugees and migrants speak

and therefore cannot help them as much as they would want to. As an example, humanitarian organizations in Turkey provide language support almost exclusively in Arabic, because 91 percent of refugees and migrants are from Syria. This neglects Syria's Kurdish speakers. It also disregards the other 9 percent of Turkey's refugees and migrants, a linguistically diverse group of around 315,000 people (Information without understanding, rights without meaning, TWB).

- **Give communicating with communities higher priority**

Appropriate technology access provided to the refugees can prevent refugees and migrants from being left out with inconsistent information and thus being vulnerable, all this by reinforcing the efficiency of reception and communication systems. If internet connection is not possible, add radio channels to be sure to reach everyone.

- **Earmark resources for trained language support**

Besides not being considered a priority by humanitarian organizations, language is not even included in the missions budget. Charities often have difficulties to get funds to pay interpreters and translators, no matter what country they're in.

- **Overcome reluctance to share information**

Governments may not always be in favor of communication with migrants since this would mean promoting immigration. Therefore they sometimes are reluctant to inform migrants and refugees of

their rights.

## Methods

Once we decided to build our research on the case of refugees and migrants facing the language barrier, we set ourselves two main objectives:

- understand the type of information needed by these populations and the consequences that the lack of convenient information had on their lives;
- study the challenges met by professionals in communication fields when dealing with populations with uneven literacy levels and how they address these.

Overall, the intention was to highlight why access to information played a key part in the migrant crisis and to outline the relationship of technical communication with this issue.

Our first contact was with Technical Writers Without Borders, a non-profit organization that provides technical communication expertise and services. Our exchanges with its founder is in fact the very reason we decided to write this research paper.

Then we contacted a French refugee aid organization. We intended to not only get a global overview of their action but also to identify in which ways refugees were in contact with anything close to technical communication. We also got the chance to get the insights of a content designing professional and a volunteer in a translating organization.

We prepared an interview framework covering the following questions:

- In those types of crises, what profiles do you meet? Do they share common issues?
- What kind of information do they need? Are some more vital than others? Do they express any needs for information and if so, which?
- How do you adapt to the different populations?
- Is translation always the best answer, or do you have other techniques that prove efficient? (simplified language, graphic elements...)

## **Results**

### **Our starting point**

The founder of Technical Writers Without Borders brought up the case of a cleaning company that had engaged Nigerian women who did not speak or read French. This company had reached out to Technical Writers Without Borders because the women working in the company had trouble understanding the instructions and could not be given a proper training. This could prove troublesome and even dangerous especially considering that they have to handle chemical components. To cope with the problem, the immediate solution for the company was to rely on face-to-face demonstration by a qualified person. While this works as a stopgap solution, it implies that every time a new non-French speaking employee is recruited someone must intervene to train her personally, which is clearly not practical. This example illustrated the organization's purposes

and ambitions, which is to develop efficient, asynchronous solutions for these situations.

## **Insights from volunteer at Translators Without Borders**

Translators Without Borders is a non-profit organization that fights against language barriers; it intervenes especially in contexts of crises to help provide emergency information to populations in need.

Our contact told us that, unsurprisingly, she mostly has to deal with really poor people who want to know what is being done “to get them back to their homes”. Along with food and water, they need hope and long term solutions to rebuild their lives.

To help them transmit information, TWB hires interpreters from aid organization staff and sets up a number of devices or processes such as glossaries or socio-linguistic sessions for the interpreters they train. To make the best of this initiative, they also ask the managers who use interpreters to learn the best way to work with translators.

## **Insights from a web content designer**

We also got to interview a content designer who had the opportunity to work for well-known structures like the British government website.

She brought up several practical aspects of technical communication, such as plain english or the use of icône, and the way its messages can be transmitted to people who cannot read. She spoke about accessibility criteria that are becoming more and more referred to, which is, according to her, a good thing even though it evolves slowly. She also explained that she once had to work with deaf people and in that case, video was still the best possible way to make oneself understood from this audience. Then she warned us about icons: those little pictograms are getting more and

more fashionable but don't always fit the situation in which they are employed: sometimes users do not understand what they mean.

She mentioned simplified english, and highlighted important psychological aspects we had not thought about. An article she shared with us shows for instance that contractions in english such as “don't” or “can't” often confuse readers. Contracting the “not” can lead people to understand the contrary of what is meant so technical communication should abstain from using contractions. She concluded by explaining that simplified english cannot be written according to any fixed rule but, since it is dedicated to a certain audience, the writer has to put himself in the targeted audience's shoes in order to write something these people will understand. She said that the text had to “*reflect the user's mental model*” and that simplified text is the result of this approach.

She illustrated this with an anecdote showing how the state of mind in which the reader is when he gets the information totally influences the way he understands it, taking the example of a mom whose kid gets sick and who thinks she is a bad parent just because she did not see her son had a rash. She showed us how the feelings of the mom influenced the way she perceived the information she read on the net on the moment, and how she understood it once she had calmed down. Because we focused on the case of refugees, we understood that this psychological disposition can be very determining, since those people reach new countries under a great level of stress and have been through traumatic events.

## **Insights from a volunteer in a French aid refugee organization**

This organization is in direct contact with refugees in Paris. Their activity consists in providing food, hygienic products, clothes... and other emergency articles people need every day. A great part of the association's activity also consists in providing information to the refugees: about hospitals, free clinics, how to get to the asylum center, how to get the papers they need, and any emergency need they can meet.

The volunteer insisted on the fact that many of the refugees have gone through traumatic events. While they may try to deal with those by themselves, they may also need some psychological help. She explained that the members of the association try to translate in the refugees' language, but most of them come from Afghanistan, Mali, Sudan, Tibet...

They also need to know about their rights, which is why the association has engaged in a partnership with ISM Interpretariat, to translate information in arabic or pashto.

She concluded by saying that the language barrier remains a great problem for them, especially for the english-speaking migrants who intend ultimately to reach the United Kingdom. Eventually, in her opinion, learning french would be the best solution which is why the association shows videos and tutorials to help refugees learn french but she has no idea about their effectiveness yet.

## **Discussion**

### **Life without reliable information**

Wherever they go and wherever they come from, migrants all experience living in regions where usages and rules vary more or less

from what they previously encountered. This gap between their knowledge and a country's reality must be bridged by access to the relevant information. Because they lack effective access to official sources, it is not uncommon for migrants to rely on unofficial and unverified channels with the risk of receiving partial, distorted or unreliable information. Already surrounded by a new and unknown environment, they are led to rely on people they never met before with information they have little or no way to verify.

When they do not get access to understandable information, one solution for refugees is to have someone by their side to guide them. Even though it is an effective solution, it is neither practical nor efficient as it requires someone else's time and does not allow for asynchronicity therefore preventing refugees to go through their life as individuals. There should be a balance between being able to do everything on your own and requiring help for every little thing you need to do.

This applies to the professional world too. People need to have access to information and instructions, and above all, they need to understand what they are told. Let's take as an example the case of the cleaning company with Nigerian employees. The integration of those women who could not read french was really put to the test, since being unable to educate themselves created a lack of autonomy and a potential safety risk. Your activity and skills are part of your identity which is why it is important to seek ways to empower these women and those in similar situations.

Technical communication covers a wide range of techniques and practical applications. Through their journey, refugees meet all kinds of

information material to get them through various aspects of life: from practical information to access first care facilities to understandable explanations about legal procedures. When they fail to retrieve the relevant information, risks range from getting lost in the subway to making *“high-risk choices, including dropping out of the formal reception system, out of ignorance of their rights and options.”* (Translators Without Borders, 2017). In a crisis situation for example, they need to acknowledge the procedures and understand the potential risks. They should know where and how to obtain assistance, and how to inform stakeholders of their needs (MICIC, 2016).

## **Why technical communication is relevant**

The role of technical communication is rarely - if ever - considered in social crises. We believe this is a mistake. As we have just established, the inability to understand information has a tremendous impact on migrants' life and future. Even if it is not perceived as such in the first place, a lot of the information is delivered through formats that fit technical communication practices. Adjusting to the audience is one of technical communication's main goal, and most of the time the information that migrants and refugees come across along their way has not been adjusted for them. Providing clear and objective information also falls within the scope of technical communication. There is clearly a path to explore and develop for technical communication to become a main actor in making information accessible to all.

## **Limits**

We were unable to directly contact refugees and migrants and had to rely on the testimonies of “refugee helpers” and studies done in migration crisis (TWB).

Refugees are so diverse in terms of backgrounds, language, education-level, and host country language proficiency that establishing a single standard pattern to communicate efficiently is probably an unachievable goal. What is more, our correspondent from the French charity organization reminded us that there is no such thing as a “refugee-profile” so we realized that our first question was maybe inappropriate.

The most important limitation was brought out not by the research method but by the reality we encountered in today’s society. No matter the angle we took to study the question, language remained at the heart of our research every step of the way. Our results show that there is not - or at least not yet - a better way to communicate with people than writing or speaking in a language they can properly understand. Even non-written communication formats involve some form of linguistic information. On top of being a powerful communication tool, language is also a key to integration.

## **Conclusion**

From the elements we have gathered, it seems that the language used in communication is the biggest obstacle to getting information across to refugees. Indeed, most materials designed for them are written in English, French or Arabic and fail to acknowledge the diversity of languages spoken and understood by the targeted audiences. And gaps between literacy levels are not even considered. This is often a matter of resources that organizations cannot afford such as staff with the relevant language skills. However, it can also stem from a lack of data about refugees, including their degree of proficiency in their country’s official language, that leads to inappropriate information material.

Nevertheless, the format chosen to spread the information also affects the way the information itself is perceived. A document must be clear and appropriate for everyone, including children, women, elderly and less literate people. Although written documents are the most popular formats even among those who cannot read what is written, there are other formats bypass reading such as videos, infographics or face-to-face training but they are not a one-stop solution and also bear their load of complications. If language is needed in a video for example, which one should be used? How do you make sure that refugees have access to the necessary tools to visualize videos? Can you certify that all your visual representations are understood in the same way by everybody? On top of all of that, all of these means require time, resources and skills not always available to organizations. This is where technical communicators could act, as they have a wide range of skills to offer.

This situation has major consequences for migrants and refugees, such as failure to understand and exercise their rights, difficulties in finding a job or a housing... for refugees language is a preliminary to integration, and as our correspondent from the French charity organization said it, the most important thing that refugees can do to stabilise their situation is to learn the local language.

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**Soraya Bekkouche** is a french technical writer who obtained a Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages at Paris 7 Diderot in 2013. During her first year of Master's degree in Paris in Creating Multilingual and Multimedia-typed Documents, she studied a semester in the University of Birmingham, England. During her second year of Master's degree, she worked as an apprentice User Assistance Developer at SAP, a german software company, writing technical documentation, creating videos and image maps (interactive images).

After studying french history and english-speaking civilizations, literatures and language, **Lucie Petit** spent a semester in Denmark learning about communication. When she came back in 2017, she began her Master degree in technical communication at Paris Diderot while working as a junior technical writer at Sinequa, a french software company.

Just like Soraya, **Léa Butel** obtained her Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages at Paris 7 Diderot but did her first year of Master's degree at Paris 3. She helped raising funds for UNICEF for a couple of years before going back to Paris 7 to do her second year of her Master's degree, in technical writing, working as an apprentice at Thalès.

## Archive

As we can see it very often in the media, globalization is certainly the most frequent word used to describe our society. As globalization mechanisms blur frontiers, another worldwide phenomenon, migration, is once again put to the forefront as we witness an major refugee crisis.

Newspaper around the world were moved by the story of young Aylan's body found dead on a turkish beach, and the number of articles about the thousands of people risking their lives to run away from wars and conflicts increases every day. In 2016, France welcomed over 78 000 asylum seekers and the number keeps on increasing. Several refugee camps recently appeared in Paris, France, and more and more citizens are getting concerned by the very poor conditions in which those people try to survive in countries they do not know. From health care to administrative papers, the difficulty is huge for those people, already in vulnerable situation. The trouble starts at the very moment they land in a country and find themselves unable to read the signs in front of them.

According to the Ministère de l'Intérieur, refugees in France in 2017 mostly came from Albany, Sudan or Afghanistan, and 97% of the 10 000 Syrian asylum seekers got their asylum status granted in 2017. Running away from wars and armed conflicts of countries where analphabetism remains high, all those people leave their country and reach another one with very different cultural codes and sometimes different alphabet. Many of them have a hard time adapting and end up in those refugee camps because they can't understand the signs, notes, indications written in front of them. Getting to the town hall to get information starts with taking the

subway and buy a ticket, which turns out to be impossible for most refugees.

## **Literacy**

According to the Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey (OCDE and Statistiques Canada, 2000), literacy is *“the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”* It is a concept that easily applies to technical documentation. The OCDE report divides literacy in three domain, the closest one to technical communication being “Document literacy – the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.”

They distinguish five levels of literacy where level three is “considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society”. In our article, “those who cannot read” would correspond to people identified as level one or two.

Obviously, it is important to remember that for one individual the level of literacy vary from one language to another, especially in the context of migration where one’s mother tongue is not always used in the country they live in let alone the official language. Some may be able to read in their mother tongue, in english or in another language and some may not be able to read at all.