

Research Article

African languages and COVID-19: Translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information in rural communities in Igbo land, Nigeria

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The study reflects on how rural communities negotiate information about COVID-19 including everyday discourses of COVID-19 in the Igbo rural communities. More specifically, it examined Igbo translations, interpretations and new terminologies of COVID-19 in rural communities in South-Eastern Nigeria. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, it discovered that rural people talk about or translate COVID-19 information in a number of ways including metaphors, neologism or coinages and new uses of existing words/terms. Implicit in the new terminologies, translations and interpretations are misinformation of various kinds and shades ranging from that COVID-19 is a death sentence, a disease or virus that does not affect the Black/African, to a disease that affects only the wealthy. The study makes an intervention relating to factors affecting behavioral changes regarding COVID-19 in rural communities of Nigeria, and provides a fuller understanding of the link between public health information, language and culture.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has given rise to the need for a better understanding of the link between public health information, language and culture. It has equally become pertinent to reflect on how different communities interpret and negotiate information about the virus. Language and understanding of

culture are crucial elements of public health information. Individuals behavioural change is a key response to the COVID-19 crisis, including change in terms of adherence to safety protocols such as regular hand washing, isolation, wearing of masks, social distancing and so on. This change of behaviour may rely on accurate, reliable and accessible information about COVID-19 and a good understanding of risks associated with the virus among members of the community.

Rural communities – including small group communities in Igbo land, Nigeria – have access to and rely on information about COVID-19 in their languages or dialects. This results in various ideological/cultural shades of translations of COVID-19 information which could breed misinformation and/or inform their understanding of the COVID-19 as well as the behavioural response among the communities. In addition, individual members of rural communities have different interpretations of COVID-19 which may breed misconceptions. This is related to the need for scholars to pay attention to everyday discourses of the pandemic, and how people talk about the pandemic in different languages (Mesthrie, 2020). This study reflects on how rural communities in Igbo land interpret and negotiate information on COVID-19, as a way of understanding how this ‘new lexicon of coping’ (Mesthrie, 2020) relate to accurate information or misinformation. This would also reveal some factors that may affect behavioral changes such as adherence to safety measures among members of rural communities in Nigeria.

The study analyses translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information in rural communities in Igbo land of Nigeria. It reports on data collected via semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). It shows that some translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information fall short of the needed reliability, and so, do not establish accurate information. The study reveals the use of analogy, coinages, and metaphors in local dialect translations of COVID-19 information as well as culture-influenced interpretations of COVID-19 which impede information or constitute misinformation.

The paper begins with a brief contextualization of the study. This is followed by the theoretical and methodological background which details the link between translation, interpretation, culture and information exchange from specific sociolinguistic and semiotic perspectives, as well as the methodology employed. Thereafter, we highlight different translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information, exploring their relation to reliable and accurate COVID-19 information or misinformation.

Contextualizing the study

Previous studies have revealed linguistic innovations, coinages and neologisms associated with COVID-19, and that these coinages gradually become part of the lexicon of languages (Mesthrie, 2020, Howell,

2020, Adum, 2020). Other studies reveal the relationship between messaging about COVID-19 and adherence to safety measures (Zonga, 2020, Myers, 2020) as well as on how different sources of information about COVID-19 (also called infodemic of COVID-19) and ideological slants in the discourses (also called weaponization of COVID-19) relate to change in behaviour (Unagha, 2020, Akpuda, 2020). More recently, there is a lot of interest in African languages and COVID-19. Notably, the “FAQ on COVID-19 and misinformation shredder in African local languages -Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba” (UN-Nigeria, 2020) as well as interest in understanding COVID-19 public health information among linguistically diverse communities in London (SOAS, 2021). The present study on rural communities in Igbo land, Nigeria adds to and feeds into the recent discussions on how different communities interpret and negotiate information about COVID-19. The study seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the Igbo language translations of COVID-19 information in rural communities?
2. What are the interpretations of COVID-19 information among members of the Igbo rural communities?
3. In what ways do the translations and interpretations relate to reliable, and establish accurate COVID-19 information or misinformation?

Conceptual and methodological framework

Translation and interpretation are integral aspects of information exchange. These practices have constantly faced numerous challenges and demands including the necessity of the translator to stay faithful to the source text in transferring meaning into the target language, as well as culture-influence in the interpretations of information and or concepts (Pagliawan, 2017). According to Pagliawan (2017, p.19), “Translation may be partly described as the interpretation of a text’s meaning, and the subsequent production of its equivalent text expressing the same message in a different language.” Here, meaning in the source text is carried across to the target text. In this transfer of meaning, problems had been observed to surface, unfortunately, threatening to impair accuracy. So, accuracy in translation practice is a prerequisite for effective information exchange as failure on this may result to misinformation; that is, false information not intended to cause harm (Sande, 2019).

“Interpretation is the act of explaining, reframing, or otherwise showing your own understanding of something. A person who translates one language into another is called an interpreter because such people engage in explaining what a person is saying to someone who doesn’t understand what is said in another language. Interpretation requires you to first understand the piece of music, text, language, or

idea, and then give your explanation of it” (*Vocabulary*, 2018). Poor interpretation may lead to misconceptions – a view or opinion that is incorrect based on faulty understanding.

Scholars have assumed approaches that explain the ways in which translation, interpretation, and culture interaction, some of which include the sociolinguistic and semiotic approaches. Espousing the sociolinguistic approach, Mathieu (2015) states that the social context defines what is and what is not translatable as well as what is or what is not acceptable through selection, filtering and even censorship. According to this perspective, a translator is necessarily the product of his or her society: our own sociocultural background is present in everything we translate. This approach was developed by the School of Tel Aviv, and popularized by Toury (1978), Brisset (1990), Zohar and Toury (1995). Basically, the approach assumes that the sociocultural world and language nuances should interface in translation practice. This implicates culture and variation in translation practice, and has influenced our choice of this approach in analyzing translations of COVID-19 information in rural communities in Igbo land.

Mathieu (2015) states that the semiotic approach assumes that a meaning is the result of a collaboration between a sign, an object, and an interpreter. Thus, from the perspective of semiotics, translation is thought of as a way of interpreting texts in which encyclopedic content varies based on individual understanding and unique sociocultural contexts which may account for different interpretations to an issue such as COVID-19 information.

In terms of methodology, the study employed qualitative methodological approaches involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 20 informants drawn from five rural communities in Igbo land. The interviews aimed at documenting translations of COVID-19 information were guided by self-composed inventory of COVID-19 information made up of 20 words/expressions on COVID 19 in the English language. The semi-structured interviews were conducted for 15 minutes, with each of the informants allowing the researchers to document translations of COVID 19 information by way of informants providing Igbo language options to the COVID-19 information in English language, as well as their recorded fluent speeches or discourses.

The focus group discussions aimed at documenting interpretations of COVID-19 information involved 10 randomly selected informants with the researchers as the anchors, focused on individual views, opinions and understanding of COVID-19 information. This helped us to document different interpretations of COVID-19 information among members of the rural communities.

Analysis of the terms featured the thematic analysis which entailed identifying some salient points as key themes in the translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information. This enabled us to identify

some linguistic strategies adopted in the local translations and interpretations. Analysis also featured ‘Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)’ (Fairclough, 2010) – which is an approach that sees discourses as a form of social practice and is concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. With this approach, we tried to identify some misinformation as well as misinterpretations and misconceptions inherent and or implied in the local translations and interpretations.

Igbo language translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information in rural communities

In this section, we present some translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information in rural communities in Igbo land, identifying some linguistic resources adopted in realizing the translations and interpretations, as well as highlighting their relation to accurate COVID-19 information and or misinformation. On the Igbo translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information in the rural communities, we identified a range of linguistic methods including analogy (metaphor and simile), and neologisms, as well as semantic changes.

Analogy featured prominently in the local translation and interpretations of COVID-19 information. Simply put, an analogy refers to saying that something is like something else to make some sort of explanatory point. It involves frequent use of metaphors and similes. While a metaphor makes a comparison between two things that are not alike but do have something in common, simile is a phrase that uses a comparison to describe. Metaphor is emphatic about description while simile is comparative often using the word “like”. “The Igbo conceptualize and concretize realities as well as their worldview implicitly using metaphorical expressions. The concretizing of their realities is achieved by associating features or attributes of an entity to another” (Onwukwe, 2020, p.1). Consider the following examples:

1.

- a. *Oga obiri n'aja ocha* “advanced form of or master of HIV”
- b. *Oria izuuka abuo* “Sickness/disease of two weeks’ lifespan”
- c. *Oria ndi mba ofesi* “foreign/alien sickness/disease”
- d. *Oria ndi isi ocha* “Sickness for the white”
- e. *Oria ogaranya* “wealthy man’s sickness”
- f. *I shi ndu agbaka* “Contaminated/Infected Sneezing”

g. *O nyiri onwu izu uka abuo* “Sickness/disease that defiles death in two weeks”

The examples (1a-g) above are different translations and interpretations of the term COVID-19. They are essentially analogies of the term “COVID-19” which are realized through metaphors and simile. “Speakers of a language tend to use analogies in their local language translations and interpretations of concepts that are alien to them” (Ohaikwe, 2015, p.34; Okeogu, 2015). COVID-19, both as a concept and sickness, is alien to the Igbo culture, and it is evident that there is the use of metaphors in the Igbo speaker’s translations and interpretations. For instance, in 1(a) COVID-19 is described in reference to another sickness – the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) – which is popularly translated into Igbo as “*obiri n’aja ocha*” meaning “a sickness that ends in death.” In this example, HIV is a metaphor for COVID-19. It is translated or interpreted as *oga obiri n’aja ocha*, meaning “an advanced form of, or master of, or the-one-that-is-bigger-than HIV, and constitutes an attempt to describe COVID-19 as an inevitable death-bearing sickness. This may be considered an attempt to make links with past epidemics in the new terminologies. Reference is also made to how long it takes for the symptoms of COVID-19 disease to appear in human body which is about 5–6 days or up to 14 days from when someone is infected with the virus ([healthtips/coronavirus](https://www.healthtips.org/coronavirus), 2020). This is conceived as the lifespan of the COVID-19 virus, and locals employ this as an analogy for the description of COVID-19. In examples (b) and (g), fourteen (14) days (that is, “*izuuka abuo*”) is used as a metaphor for COVID-19.

It is further observed that some translations or interpretations describe COVID-19 as a disease that is alien to the Igbo people. This may be borne out of the information that it was first discovered in Wuhan, China before spreading to other parts of the world. Examples of such terms can be seen in 1 (c) and (d) which describe COVID-19 as “a sickness for the white people” or “foreign/alien sickness”. This suggests a (mis)conception among members of the local communities that COVID-19 is not a disease prevalent among the black but only in white or non-black societies. Other metaphorical expressions used in the description of COVID-19 virus are in 1 (e) and (f). With these examples, the virus/disease is described as that which is common among the wealthy or rich people in the society. This description is borne out of the fact that at the early stages of the outbreak of the disease, there were more cases of the virus infecting particularly people who travelled out of the country and some people of the high social class or status. Also, in example (f), the disease is described in relation to sneezing. Health agencies tell us that regular and acute sneezing is one of the symptoms of the virus. This in the Igbo rural clime becomes a metaphor for COVID-19. Sneezing before the advent of COVID-19 was seen as an involuntary act which attracted no suspicion of infection – a reason for which the Igbo people echo “*ndu gi*” meaning “Life to you” whenever

anyone sneezes around them. It is an Igbo folk belief that sneezing signals that a person's spirit has been summoned or called elsewhere, and people around should wish that such call or summon is not for negative reasons, hence the supplication of "ndu gi". However, sneezing is now a metaphor for COVID-19, specifically a type of sneezing that is triggered by an infection with the COVID-19 virus, hence the term "ishi ndu agbaka" literally meaning "sneezing that is not in vein" or an "infected sneezing."

In addition to the term COVID-19, other COVID-19 - related terms are translated and interpreted in Igbo local communities via metaphors. For instance, face mask- a cloth or material that has multiple layers of fabric often worn to cover nose and mouth against the spread of COVID-19 virus has taken a range of new terminologies such as:

2.

- a. *okpu mmanwu*,
- b. *mmanwu*
- c. *akwa onye oria koro*
- d. *akwa ekpo*
- e. *ngwa oria nwabekee*

Mmanwu or *ekpo* (in some dialects of Igbo) literally means "masquerade," and a masquerade often wears mask to cover its face. So, face mask is metaphorically referred to as *mmanwu* or *okpu* (cover) or *akwa* (cloth) *mmanwu*. It is also described as *Akwa onye oria koro*, meaning "a cloth often used by one infected with corona virus" as well as "*ngwa oria nwabeke*" which means "item associated with the disease that affects White people or foreign or alien disease/virus". These terminologies do not only reveal different ways in which people talk about the pandemic and coronavirus but also different misconceptions of COVID-19 including that the disease affects only the White people.

COVID-19 terminologies in the Igbo rural communities were also spoken of in the form of neologisms or coinages which are new terms or new uses of existing terms in the Igbo language. They frequently involve words whose meanings change through extension/broadening, narrowing, amelioration (meaning change from negative to positive) or pejoration (meaning change from positive to negative). These broadly constitute linguistic innovations that are results of the pandemic. we identified some cases of coinages or new terminologies as in the examples below:

3.

- a. Koro "Coronavirus"

- b. *Koro koro* “Coronavirus”
- c. *korolaa (mmuo)* “Coronavirus”
- d. *Kwa kwa* “quarantine”
- e. *Kwa gi ba n’ngaa* “cough and be isolated”
- f. *Nga oria koro* “quarantine or isolation”

Koro as well as its duplicated form *Koro koro* are Igbo-adaptations of the English word “Coronavirus” and have become new terminologies that have fast gained currency in the Igbo rural communities. An interesting innovation is seen in the term “*Korolaa (mmuo)*” which is also an Igbo adaptation of the word Coronavirus but with an extended meaning like “Coronavirus that leads to death” which is against science-based information. we identified another new terminology ‘*kwa kwa*’ which is also an Igbo adaption of the term “Quarantine,” as well as a rather interesting cliché “*kwa gi ba n’ngaa*,” meaning “cough and be isolated or quarantined.” *Nga* in Igbo is a confined place often used to refer to prisons and other human confinements. This word is now used to refer to COVID terms such as ‘isolation’- (one of several measures that can be taken in infection control, the prevention of communicable diseases from being transmitted from a patient to another person) and ‘quarantine’ (a state, period, or place of isolation in which people or animals that have arrived from elsewhere or been exposed to infectious or contagious disease are placed) as in *Nga oria koro*. It was observed that people humorously use these words/terms for example, when one coughs constantly, people could say “*I na akwa biko itinyekwalam n’nga koro*,” meaning “mind your cough so that you will not infect me with Coronavirus and get me into isolation or quarantine.” This statement is enough to set a hitherto unperturbed audience into anxiety or jittery in an event of a constant or persistent cough or sneezing. Some studies allude to coinages as new COVID terms, for instance, Mesthrie (2020, p.1) observes that “Unsurprisingly, words like *ikhorona* and *ikhovidi* (and close pronunciation variants) have entered the isiXhosa language at high speed.” These coinages and ways of speaking about the pandemic offer insights into (mis)interpretations of the virus which often run contrary to science-based facts about COVID-19. These are discussed in some detail in the subsequent section.

In addition to coinages, some Igbo Covid-related terms emerge through semantic changes which involve essentially new uses of existing terms in the language. we identified some examples below:

4.

- a. *Nanimgebi* “isolation or social distancing”

- b. *Zere uwa* “isolation, quarantine or social distancing”
- c. *Soroibe* “isolation, quarantine or social distancing”
- d. *Nso oha* “isolation or social distancing”
- e. *Ukwara ukwu* “Covid-related constant cough”
- f. *Igba nsokwu* “isolation or social distancing “
- g. *Ngaa oria koro* “quarantine or isolation”

Nanimgebi literally means ‘only I will live (here),’ and its original use refers to a particular plant that grows alone. This meaning is extended to refer to some safety measures such as isolation or social distancing. *Zere uwa* literally means ‘avoid people,’ and it is originally an idiomatic expression that is often used when giving an advice to people to be circumspect in their dealing with other people. This meaning is extended to refer to safety measures such as isolation, social distancing or quarantine. Other neologisms whose literary meaning are extended include *soroibe* which literally means ‘avoid people or your fellow’ while *Nso oha* literary means ‘avoidance of all or avoid all’ as well as *igba nsokwu* ‘to avoid someone.’ Other neologisms derived through meaning narrowing include *Ukwara ukwu* which literally means ‘intense cough or heightened or big cough’, and it’s used as opposed to *Ukwa nta* ‘mild cough’ which is a sickness and may also be a symptom of other sicknesses such as malaria. Its use in this context is to refer to a type of cough that is Covid-related, and different from the other coughs associated with other sicknesses. There is a case of semantic shift in the realization of some Igbo neologisms associated with COVID-19, and this is evident in the example *Ngaa oria koro* which literally means ‘a seclusion or a prison of a sort associated with Coronavirus.’ *Ngaa* means ‘prison’ and its meaning in this context is shifted to refer to isolation or quarantine. Neologisms or semantic changes as linguistic strategies for creation of new Covid terminologies have also be alluded to in other climes. Thabo Ditsele explains a new South African term for ‘quarantine’ – *diagelo* – that he came across in Setswana social media in relation to the present crisis (personal communication 2020 May 22). The word has undergone an extension of meaning from its original use within the traditional African church for ‘spiritual cleansing by confinement in the home of a church elder’.

Igbo language translations and interpretations of Covid-19: Misinformation?

It is pertinent to observe that the translations and interpretations or new Igbo terminologies are pragmatically correct as the intended meanings are known and shared among people in the communities. However, there are nuances of the meanings of the Igbo terms which may run contrary to science-based facts or information about COVID-19. Also, some of these new terminologies may have been developed or realized in line with certain social and cultural conceptions and beliefs which may also negate science-based facts about COVID-19. This section therefore focuses on interrogating the translations and interpretations or Igbo new terminologies of COVID-19, and to discuss how they relate to accurate COVID-19 information or misinformation.

There is misinformation in the Igbo translations and interpretations of COVID-19 information. “Misinformation refers to false or out-of-context information that is presented as fact regardless of an intent to deceive” (Gebel, 2021, p.1). This kind of misinformation is presented as facts, not intended to deceive, and draws from misconceptions of COVID-19 among members of the Igbo rural communities. The misconceptions are often social and cultural beliefs that run contrary to science-based information about COVID-19. A number of the misconceptions which are inherent or implied in the new terminologies include that COVID-19 is a death sentence, a disease or virus that does not affect the Black/African, and a disease that affects only the wealthy.

Some of the translations imply that COVID-19 is a death sentence, and they include *Oga obiri n'aja ocha* “advanced form of or master of HIV”, as well as *Korolaa (mmuo)*” which means ‘Coronavirus that leads to death.’ ‘*Obiri n'aja ocha*’ literally means ‘something that is death-bound,’ and in reference to coronavirus, where the Covid-19 term ‘*Oga biri n'aja ocha*’ is derived. This may have emanated from the social and cultural misconception similar to that of HIV/AIDS that people infected are death-bound as it was claimed that HIV/AIDS had no preventive or curative drugs. This is explicit in the statement from one of the interviewees (with English translation):

Anyi na-akpo ya oga obiri n'aja ocha maka oria na-egbu na-eleghi anya n'azu. Hapucha ihe nile a na-ekwu n'radio and television. O kwa Obuchi a ka sin a o bu ya gburu nwanne m? Otutu ndi oyibo anwuola site na-aka oria koro koro a.

We call it an advanced form of HIV/AIDS because this sickness kills at once. Don't mind all these things they say on radio and Television. Is it not the other day that they said it killed my brother? So many white people are dead as result of infection with Coronavirus.

The observation alludes to the misinformation which is that COVID-19 is a death-sentence as implied in the translation "Oga obiri n'aja ocha." Other translations and interpretations imply that COVID-19 virus is found more and infects more of White people- a reason for which it is said to be alien to the Igbo or is often said to be a 'Whiteman's sickness' in local parlance. This misinformation is implied in the following Igbo translations: *Oria ndi mba ofesi* "foreign/alien sickness/disease" and *Oria ndi isi ocha* "Sickness for the white." And it is made more explicit in the statement below:

Nwanne oria a adighi n'ebe anyi. Akpu m miri n'onu ekwu ya? Ihe anyi na-akpo ya bu oria nwabeke ma o bu oria ndi isi ocha maka odighi n'be anyi. O kwa ebe ha ka o bidoro? O bu oria ha. O ma nnolata n'be anyi.

My brother/friend, this sickness is not in our place. I am not mincing words! What we call it is sickness for the White because you cannot find it here. Is it not from their place (white) that it started? It is their own! It cannot survive in our locality.

Again, the statement suggests a misconception that runs contrary to science-based fact about COVID-19 as it is reported that "Covid virus operates in all localities and environments the moment a carrier moves to such areas, and anybody can be infected irrespective of complexion or blood group" (*Healthtips*, WHO, 2020, p.34).

Implicit in the translations and interpretations is a misinformation which is that the virus affects only the wealthy or that COVID-19 is associated with the wealthy. This is implied in the Igbo translation such as *Oria ogaranya* "wealthy man's sickness" and made more explicit in the statement below:

O bu obughi oria ndi nwere ego? I huru ebe Da mgbokwo ma o bu mazi Amechi butere ya bu oria? O kwa ndi n'efe efe na efepu. M noro n'Ogbaano ebe a, oria koro o ga bia buru m? Ile anya otutu ndi ogbula n'Naijiria bucha ndi ukwu ndi ukwu, ndi ogaranya.

Is it not a sickness for the wealthy? Has it been said that Da Mgbokwu or Mr Amechi is infected? Is it not those that fly in and out of Nigeria? If I stay in my village here (Ogbaano), will I be infected by Coronavirus? If you check it, all those that have died of Coronavirus are wealthy people, big people.

The observation underscores a prevailing social belief amongst some members of local communities that the disease can only affect the wealthy which is narrowly defined as one who has the means to travel frequently in and out of the country.

The ideological shades of translation bred misconceptions and misinformation that run contrary to scientific facts about COVID-19 and may inform understanding of the Covid-19 as well as the behavioural response among the communities, particularly the safety measures. “The south-eastern Nigeria (Igbo land) has more instances of misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria. For example, the belief that the virus does not affect the black man does not survive and cannot be transmitted in the hot temperature of the East is prevalent among the people (Unagha, 2019, p.9). It is reported that “there are misconceptions among the Igbo regarding the reality of the virus, and the prevalence of the belief that the virus could be cured using traditional and local herbs and mixtures...The level of adherence to safety measures is terribly low in Nigeria and particularly so among the Igbo” (Nwadu, 2019, p.34).

Summary and conclusion

The study has provided insights into how rural communities negotiate information about COVID-19 including everyday discourses of COVID-19 in the Igbo rural communities. It specifically examined Igbo translations, interpretations and new terminologies for COVID-19 in some rural communities in South-Eastern Nigeria. It is discovered that rural people talk about or translate COVID-19 information in a number of ways that include metaphors, neologism or coinages and new uses of existing words/terms. Some terms/words/expressions are used metaphorically to not only refer to COVID-19 but also to re-conceptualize COVID-19 as metaphors in a manner similar to Igbo linguistic tools for concretizing and conceptualizing Igbo worldviews, beliefs. New coinages are also used to talk about COVID-19, as well as new uses of existing words in which meanings are extended, narrowed or shifted. These new uses were found in particularly COVID-19-related terms such as ‘isolation’, ‘quarantine’ and ‘social distancing’.

Implicit in the new terminologies, translations and interpretations are misinformation of various kinds and shades ranging from that COVID-19 is a death sentence, a disease or virus that does not affect the Black/African, to a disease that affects only the wealthy. Equally implicit in the terms are misconceptions of COVID-19 information which may have been drawn from the social and cultural beliefs, ideologies and norms of the rural communities. These speak about rural communities’ knowledge and understanding of COVID-19, as well as factors that influence their behavioural response in relation to adherence to safety measures. This runs contrary to science-based facts about COVID-19. This study sheds light on the link

between public health information, language and culture, as well as highlights the context of African minority and rural communities and how different communities interpret and negotiate information about COVID-19, even when such interpretations are anti-science.

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