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# *Linguistic Inclusion in Public Health Communications*

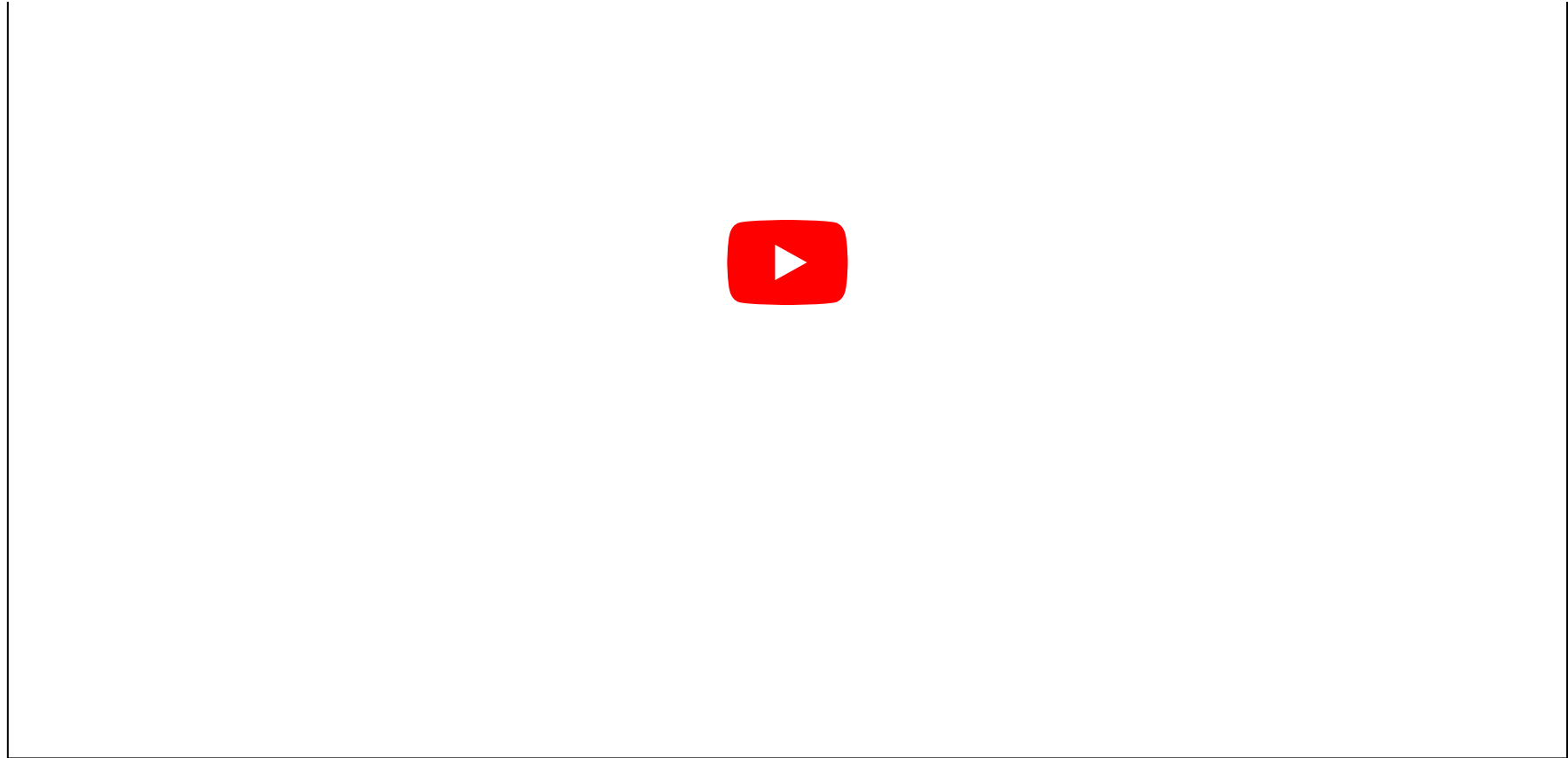
By Alexandra Grey | September 1, 2023 | One Comment | 5 min read | 208 views

The Linguistic Justice Society has kindly recorded and [uploaded my webinar](#) from July 2023, 'Linguistic Inclusion and Good Governance in Multilingual Australia'. The webinar [draws together three studies](#), two with Dr Allie Severin, undertaken 2018-2022.





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The talk brings together three of my studies, as follows:

### Study 1 ([Grey and Severin, 2021](#))



linguistic diversity.

We developed a typology of laws about language choices. The most common type (40 of the 91 relevant laws) protects people by requiring that rights, obligations or information are explained to vulnerable types of people in language that they understand. Not being an English-speaker and/or literate in English is not generally recognised as a vulnerability in these laws.

Most of these require that certain government representatives communicate in an understandable way, but the standard is unclear and variously phrased: 'plain language', 'ordinary language', 'simple language', or 'language likely to be understood'. There is no mention that this language may need to be a language other than English.

Another type of law that we found (merely) acknowledges linguistic diversity. The key example is the [Multicultural NSW Act](#), which contains NSW's Multicultural Principle that '*all individuals and institutions should respect and make provision for the culture, language and religion of others within an Australian legal and institutional framework where English is the common language*'.

Based on this Multicultural Principle and a few policies that we could locate, we conclude that there is enough of a framework in NSW that the question, *how do government language choices differentially affect different language groups?* should nowadays be asked when decisions about the NSW Government's public communications are being made.



also identifies problems. We found no consistency or predictability across websites in relation to the range of LOTE used, the amount of LOTE content produced, or the steps by which it could be accessed. The image shows a table of 64 languages other than English which appeared at least once: how many of them, and for what, varied widely across the NSW government's websites.

Overall, the actual NSW Government website communications practices we analysed did not appear to meet the standard set in the Multicultural NSW Act from which I quoted above, because provisions are not reliably or thoroughly made for non-English dominant speakers and readers.

We argue that the NSW government should not necessarily spend more money on multilingual public communications, although that may help, but rather that it should spend money on multilingual communications in an informed, strategic way, and in a way that is accountable both to policy and to the multilingual public.

### Study 3 (Grey, 2023)

Focus: Covid-19 communications from the NSW government and the Australian national government.

Summary: This study finds weaknesses in multilingual Covid communications much like we found in the first two studies about general government communications, and about which I gave a [preliminary report](#) on *Language on the Move*.



calls in the prior studies.

The international commentary also stresses that multilingual government communications should be *effective*, not merely exist. In explaining what more effective multilingual communications could entail, I advocate assessing government communications' Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Adaptability — that is, the 'Four As' recognized by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, crisis communications scholars and applied linguists (for example, [Piller, Zhang and Li, 2020](#)).

## Recommendations

I conclude the webinar by suggesting '3 Rs' in response to recurrent problems with how government communications reach, and represent, linguistically diverse publics:

1. (further) **Research** (preferably with government collaboration because important data is not publicly available / governments are best placed to collect it);
2. **Redesigning communications and their access routes** (for example, redesign the '[monolingual logic](#)' of government websites, to use a phrase from [Piller, Bruzon and Torsh, 2023](#)); and
3. **Rights-based Regulation** (to uphold standards and to strategically plan communities' input).

## References





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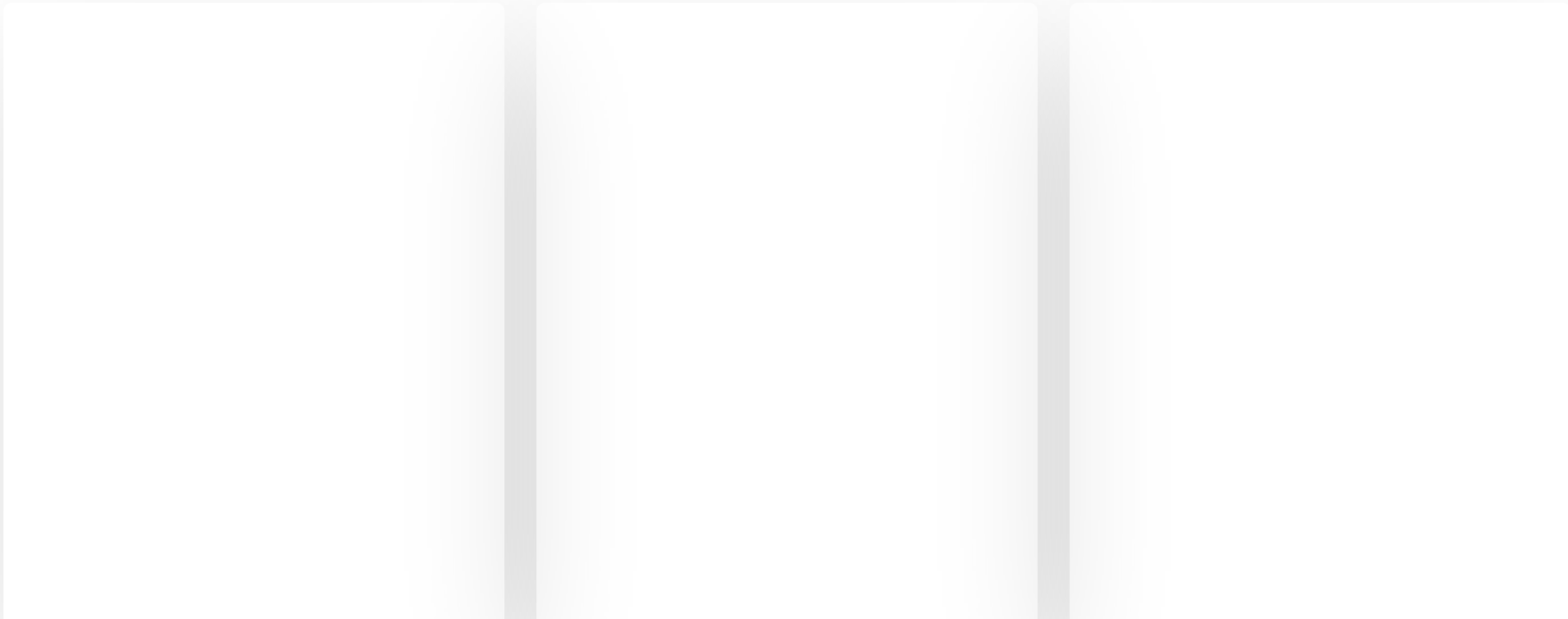
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to linguistic diversity, including in relation to multilingual, urban Australia and Australian Aboriginal language renewal. Her first book, "Language Rights in a Changing China: A National Overview and Zhuang Case Study" (De Gruyter, 2021), builds from her PhD thesis in sociolinguistics, which was supervised by Professor Ingrid Piller. Alexandra also teaches law and was formerly a legal researcher and advocacy trainer at a Chinese not-for-profit organization in Beijing.


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So you might be wondering if the attention paid to multilingual, public communications during the Covid-19 Pandemic has created any improvements to the pre-existing problems that my and Allie's research highlighted. We are waiting and watching. If your research answers this question, let us know here in the comments!

The webinar and Q&A highlighted a few other paths for follow-up research, which I'll suggest for those on the hunt for an idea:




- Audit the law and policy framework guiding multilingual government communications in other jurisdictions.
- Do research with, and about, local governments as key agents in multilingual public communications.
- Connect further with public health researchers to draw out linguistic exclusion as a factor in the social determinants of ill health or to examine how the public health literacy needs of non-dominant English speakers, and their barriers to communicative justice, may differ from those of people from English speaking backgrounds.

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