

**Sociolinguistic Dimensions in Medical Translation:
Analysing WHO's Pandemic Metaphors**



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دراسة تحليلية إحصائية في العلوم الإنسانية و إعداد معجم موحد لها

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Summary:

The paper investigates the sociolinguistic dimensions involved in translating medical texts, specifically metaphors from English to Arabic in WHO communications related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It integrates theoretical insights from sociolinguistics and translation studies, emphasising how cultural contexts, audience expectations, and linguistic norms influence translators' decisions. Drawing from conceptual metaphor theory and established translation strategies, this study systematically identified and analysed metaphors in selected WHO materials, categorising their translation according to metaphor preservation, substitution, neutralisation, omission. The research combines qualitative analysis with quantitative assessments of translation strategy frequencies to interpret how sociocultural considerations, such as cultural sensitivity, pragmatic politeness, and communicative purpose, affect translation outcomes in institutional medical contexts

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Sociolinguistics; COVID-19 Pandemic Communication; Medical Translation; Metaphor Translation

INTRODUCTION

Translation is more than converting words from one language to another; it is essentially about steering the social and cultural contexts in which languages should exist. Medical translation stands as a crucial specialisation within translation studies , characterised by high precision, rigor and ethical responsibility. Within increasing globalisation of scientific exchange context , heightened population mobility, and the development of

information technologies, interlinguistic and intercultural medical communication is of paramount importance to ensure equitable access to care, knowledge dissemination, and patient safety. However, translating medical texts presents complex challenges that extend beyond mere linguistic transposition. It lies at the intersection of intricate terminological problems and subtle sociolinguistic dynamics, two intrinsically linked dimensions that shape translation practices and determine the effectiveness of medical communication.

Beyond purely terminological challenges, medical translation is profoundly shaped by sociolinguistic factors that influence the production, circulation, and reception of texts. Applying sociolinguistic theoretical frameworks is essential to grasp these dynamics. Variation and norms theories (Federici, 2017; Toury, 1995) allow for the analysis of how medical language changes according to social, geographical, and situational contexts. Recognizing medical discourse as a sociolect specific to a professional community, or even as a technolact integrating technological elements, underscores the need for the translator to master not only the lexicon but also the discursive norms and cultural implications specific to this community (Balliu, 2005). In medical translation, particularly in English-Arabic context, cultural nuances and linguistic complexities present unique challenges, including terminological precision and sociocultural sensitivities (Almahasees, 2024; Al-Ahdal, 2025). The translation of medical metaphors, which simplify complex health-related texts, further complicates the translator's task due to metaphor's inherently cultural and conceptual nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Schäffner, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crucial role of effective medical translation in public health communications. Despite extensive research into pandemic metaphors in various languages (Garzone, 2021; Liu et al., 2023), there remains limited exploration of metaphor translation, particularly regarding institutional communications organisations, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO). To address this gap, the study investigates how sociolinguistic factors influence the translation strategies employed by WHO translators in rendering COVID-19 metaphors into Arabic. The study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do sociolinguistic features influence translation choices?
- (2) To what extent does sociolinguistic context influence metaphor translation?
- (3) Which metaphor translation strategies dominate sociocultural translation constraints and why?

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, it conducted qualitative and quantitative analysis of a corpus comprising English-Arabic metaphor pairs from WHO infographics and public guidelines. Methodologically, it integrates Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980) (hereafter CMT), Toury's translation norms, and Hatim and Mason's (1990) audience design approach, using adapted principles from the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) for data identification and categorising translation strategies according to typologies proposed by Newmark (1988) and Schäffner (2004). The findings of this study contribute to guide future institutional translation practices by anticipating an understanding of the interplay between medical translation strategies and sociolinguistic dynamics.

2. Literature Review

The literature review aims to explore the main sociolinguistic issues characterising contemporary medical translation. Drawing upon foundational works and recent research in the field, we will successively examine the challenges related to the implications of sociolinguistic factors on the translation process and the reception of translated medical texts. The objective is to provide a critical overview of the current state of knowledge, identify points of convergence and divergence in the literature, and highlight promising research avenues to better understand and optimize translation practices in this essential sector

2.1 Medical Communications Between Translation Challenges and Sociolinguistic Considerations

Translation is fundamentally a sociolinguistic activity that mediates not only between languages but also between cultures and social contexts (Federici 2017). Translation theories have progressively recognised the importance of social and cultural factors. Nida (1979), a pioneer in this field, introduced the concept of "dynamic equivalence," emphasising the need for a translation to produce an effect on the target audience similar to that of the source text on its original audience, which implies sociocultural adaptations. The theory of norms (Toury, 1995), highlighted the sociocultural constraints governing translators' decisions, viewing translation as a fact of the target culture. Venuti (1995) explored the strategies of "domestication" (adapting to target culture norms) and "foreignization" (preserving foreign elements of the source text), underscoring the ethical and political implications of these choices. Hatim and Mason (1990) integrated pragmatic and semiotic dimensions, analysing how texts function in their

sociocultural contexts and how translation must account for registers, genres, and communicative intentions.

More recently, studies have explored how power dynamics and social inequalities manifest in institutional translation contexts (Angermeyer, 2023), pointing out that translation is not a neutral process, but can reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. Applying sociolinguistics to translation thus allows for an analysis of how linguistic variations, stylistic choices, and pragmatic adaptations in translated texts reflect and shape social and cultural relations (Santos, et al. 2022).

Translating medical texts from English into Arabic presents distinct challenges related to structural differences between the two languages such as: terminology, word formation, syntax, and sociocultural variations within the Arabic-speaking audience (Almahasees, 2024). Studies have highlighted issues of terminological inconsistency and emphasised the need to adjust register and style according to the target audience's expectations (Al-Zubi, 2023; Alhamami, 2021). Linguistic and cultural barriers in healthcare can adversely affect access to care, understanding of diagnoses and treatments, and patient satisfaction (Al Shamsi et al., 2020; Saeki et al., 2022). Henceforth, Particular attention is required when translating culturally sensitive concepts, including those related to mental health, sexuality, and death (Al-Ahdal, 2025). Medical translation and interpretation must also navigate cultural differences in perceptions of illness, the body, pain, and doctor-patient relationships (Al-Amer et al., 2016; Davidson, 2018).

Beyond terminology, translating medical texts intended for patients or the general public, such as those from the WHO, requires significant sociolinguistic and cultural adaptation to ensure clarity, acceptability, and effectiveness of the message. These challenges arise from the technical nature of terminology, the need for precise translation, and the severe ethical implications of translation errors. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique context for examining these medical translation challenges, particularly in the realm of metaphorical public health communication. It presents unique challenges due to the technicality of terminology, the need for absolute precision, and the potentially severe ethical implications of translation errors. Beyond terminology, translating medical texts intended for patients or the general public, such as those from the WHO, requires considerable sociolinguistic and cultural adaptation to ensure clarity, acceptability, and message effectiveness (Al Shamsi et al., 2020).

2.2 Metaphor Use in Pandemic Discourse

The COVID-19 pandemic stimulated a surge of research on the surrounding public and media discourse. A major focus of this research has been the analysis of metaphors used to communicate about the virus, the disease, and societal responses. The WAR metaphor (COVID-19 IS WAR) has been widely identified and critiqued in various linguistic and cultural contexts (Garzone, 2021; Liu et al., 2023), although its effectiveness and implications are debated. Other metaphors, such as those related to journeys, natural disasters, or sports, have also been observed (Abdel-Raheem, 2021).

Comparative studies have examined variations in the use of pandemic metaphors across different languages and cultures, for instance, between English and Chinese or English and Spanish in media targeting specific communities. These studies highlight how metaphorical choices can reflect and influence cultural perceptions of the pandemic and political or individual responses. However, comparative analyses involving the English-Arabic pair in this specific context remain less common.

2.3 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Translation

The complexity of metaphor translation becomes particularly acute in specialised domains such as medical communication, where accuracy and cultural sensitivity are paramount. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) developed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT), that revolutionised the understanding of metaphors, viewing them not merely as figures of speech but as fundamental cognitive mechanisms that structure our thought and understanding of the world. According to CMT, we understand abstract concepts (Target language) in terms of more concrete concepts (Source language), for example, UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING or ARGUMENT IS WAR.

These metaphorical conceptualisations are often specific to a culture and language, posing major challenges for translation (Schäffner, 2004). Metaphor translation has been the subject of extensive research that emphasised that the translatability of a metaphor depends on the extent to which the underlying conceptual metaphors are shared between the source and target cultures. Translation strategies vary: maintaining the source metaphor if it is understandable and acceptable in the target culture, replacing it with a target metaphor having a similar function, or paraphrasing/neutralising the metaphor if no appropriate equivalent exists or if the source metaphor is culturally inappropriate (Newmark, 1988). Recent research, influenced by cognitive science, explores the cognitive load associated with translating metaphors, particularly novel or creative ones (Jankowiak, 2022).

The existing literature clearly establishes the importance of sociolinguistic

factors in translation, the culturally embedded nature of metaphors, and the specific challenges of medical translation.

3. Theoretical Framework

By framing the study theoretically, the key principles, the essential concepts of the research and variables to be examined are clarified and explored.

3.1 Sociolinguistic Impact on Shaping Medical Translation Strategies

We approach translation not as a simple linguistic transfer, but as a situated social and cultural practice (Federici, 2017). Several sociolinguistic concepts are mobilised to shed light on translators' choices:

- Translation Norms and Cultural Acceptability: Based on Toury's theory of norms (1995) translation choices are guided by prevailing norms in the target culture regarding what constitutes an acceptable translation. These norms can influence the decision to maintain, modify, or omit a source metaphor based on its compatibility with Arab cultural and linguistic expectations.
- Audience Design and Register Adaptation: According to Bell's model of audience design (1984), Hatim, and Mason's work (1990) in intercultural pragmatics, translators adapt their language according to the perceived target audience. For WHO communications aimed at the general Arabic-speaking public, this potentially involves simplifying terminology, adapting the register to make it accessible and less formal, and considering the diversity of literacy levels and cultural contexts within the Arab world.
- Cultural Scripts and Sensitivity se: The translation of concepts related to health, illness, and the body is particularly shaped by culturally constructed frameworks, often referred to as "cultural scripts" (Wierzbicka, 2006). In this context, metaphors pose a distinct challenge, as they may evoke associations that conflict with the cultural norms or sensitivities specific to Arab societies (Al-Ahdal, 2025). Consequently, the translation process must engage critically with these cultural dynamics, frequently requiring the adaptation, modification, or neutralisation of metaphors that might be perceived as inappropriate or culturally misaligned.
- Linguistic Politeness and Pragmatic Considerations: Although Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is complex to apply directly without conversational analysis, its core principles—such as face-saving strategies—can inform how directive or instructional health messages are rendered in Arabic. Translators may choose more indirect or mitigated forms to preserve politeness, to reduce perceived imposition and to avoid appearing overly directive or threatening.

3.2 Identification of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980) is the basis of our analysis. (CMT) providing a framework for understanding how metaphors

structure our comprehension of abstract concepts (like the pandemic) through more concrete source domains (e.g., war, sports, a journey, etc.).

Metaphor identification in the English corpus will be guided by the principles of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) that involves : - Reading the text to understand its general meaning; - Identifying lexical units; - Determining the contextual meaning of each lexical unit; - Determining the basic , concrete meaning ; - Marking lexical units as metaphorical if a conceptual contrast exists. The approach allows us to identify systematically the metaphorical expressions in WHO source texts.

3.3 Metaphor Translation Strategies

Scholars as Newmark(1988) and Schäffner (2004)proposed five metaphor translation strategies that are used to analyse English-to-Arabic translations in WHO texts:

1. M1 → M1 (Metaphorical Equivalence): The conceptual metaphor in (SL) is transferred to the (TL) without alteration and its linguistic expression is reproduced equivalently in the (TL). The source image or concept is maintained

-Example: The body defends against cancer → يدافع الجسم ضد السرطان /ju'da:fiʕ al'dʒism dʕidd asʕ:arʕa'tʕa:n/

The war/defense metaphor is preserved exactly in Arabic, maintaining the conceptual mapping of the immune system as a defender ¹. The metaphorical concept of "defense" (يدافع -yudāfi) carries the same military/protective connotations in both languages

2. M1 → M2 (Metaphorical Substitution): The source metaphor is replaced by a different metaphor in the target language, which may be more conventional or culturally appropriate, while aiming to fulfil a similar communicative function.

-Example: High index of suspicion → درجة عالية من اليقظة /'da.ra.ʒa 'ʕa:li.ja min al'ja.qa.ða/

The technical metaphor of "index" is replaced with the more culturally resonant metaphor of "degree of alertness"²

. This substitution maintains the core meaning while using a metaphor more familiar to Arabic medical discourse.

3. M1 → NM (NO METAPHOR) (Neutralisation / Paraphrase): The metaphor is translated using a non-metaphorical expression or paraphrase. The image is lost, but the conceptual meaning is generally preserved (e.g., Mythbusters translated as

تصحيح المفاهيم المغلوطة / taṣhīḥ al-mafāhīm al-maḡlūṭa / correction of misconceptions).

4. M1 → ∅ (Omission): The metaphor present in the source text is omitted in the target text, potentially due to translation difficulties, perceived redundancy, or cultural inappropriateness.

Example : aggressive treatment → العلاج المكثف / al-‘ilāj al-mukaththaf /

The aggressive/violent connotation is omitted in favour of neutral medical terminology

5. NM → M (Metaphorisation): A non-metaphorical expression in the source text is translated using a metaphor in the target text (less common in this type of institutional translation, but possible).

This classification provides an empirical framework for evaluating the choices made by translators, by quantifying the frequency of each strategy; we can assess how metaphorical language is managed across sociolinguistic boundaries in medical translation.

3. Methodology

This section details the methodological approach adopted to conduct this case study on the translation of pandemic metaphors in WHO communications.

3.1 Research Design

Although quantitative data were also considered, the analysis was mainly qualitative and was carried out given the exploratory nature of our research questions and the need to examine complex sociolinguistic phenomena in their natural institutional context. This methodology aligns with our theoretical framework's emphasis on understanding translation as a socially situated practice, allowing for the detailed examination of contextual factors and identification of general translation trends by performing frequency calculations throw the quantitative data.

3.2 Corpus Selection

The corpus for this study consists of Eight (8) English (SL) and Arabic (TL) metaphors extracted from the official website of (WHO). This choice is justified by its central role in global health communication and the availability of official translations in Arabic (TL). The corpus consisted of eight (8) distinct metaphorical instances identified across five (5) infographics. We focused on documents intended for the public, as they are particularly likely to contain metaphors aimed

at simplifying complex concepts and are subject to stronger sociocultural adaptation pressures than purely technical texts.

The main corpus includes the webpage "Advice for the public" in English and its official Arabic version ("نصائح للجمهور بشأن مرض فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19)"). These pages contain general information, recommendations, and links to other resources. A selection of COVID-19 related infographics and posters, available on or linked from this page, often feature slogans and brief texts that are rich in metaphors.

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection was conducted in multiple phases:

- Parallel Reading: A systematic analysis of the English and Arabic versions of selected websites and visual elements to identify corresponding text segments.
- Source Metaphor Identification: Application of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) principles, as outlined by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and adapted to our context (Refer to Theoretical Framework section), to identify metaphorical expressions in the English source texts.

Translation Alignment: Systematic identification of the Arabic translation for each English metaphor, ensuring it is the WHO website's official translation.

Documentation: Create an alignment table for each pair with the English metaphor, its immediate context, the Arabic translation, the precise source reference (URL, page/document title, consultation date), and a column for strategy analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis of the collected data followed a systematic three-step process, guided by our theoretical framework. Firstly, analysing Translation Strategies used for each English-Arabic pair of metaphor. In addition, calculating the frequency of each strategy to identify general trends. Secondly, involving qualitative Analysis of Examples that compares the (ST) and (TT), examining linguistic, semantic, besides pragmatic changes, and interpreting them in light of sociolinguistic concepts. Thirdly, conducting the Sociolinguistic Analysis of each example for the general trends observed, to identify potential sociolinguistic factors that might have influenced the translation choices. In addition, we included assessment of the cultural compatibility of metaphors, the linguistic constraints of Arabic, presumed adaptations to the target audience (simplification, register), and considerations related to communication norms and politeness in (TL).

4. Findings

This section presents the findings from the analysis of data collected from WHO website (English communications and their official Arabic translations). The analysis focuses on the identification of conceptual metaphors, employed

translation strategies and the potential fundamental sociolinguistic factors. They are divided into two categories.

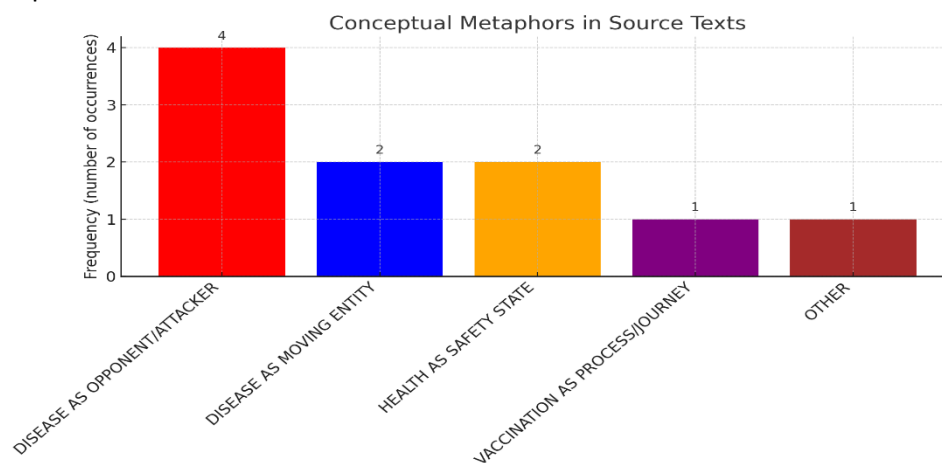
4.1 Quantitative Results

This analysis examines the translation strategies employed for medical metaphors in WHO public health communications, revealing significant sociolinguistic influences on translator decision-making processes.

Table1 : Frequency of Metaphor Types in Source Texts (English)

Metaphor Type	Frequency	Percentage	Example Infographics (Cf., Appendix A)
SPORT / GAME	6	75.0%	Infographics 1, 2, 3
OBSTACLE / BARRIER (Implied)	1	12.5%	Infographic 4
TOOL / WEAPON (vs. Misinformation)	1	12.5%	Infographic 5
Total	8	100.0%	

Graph1:



The data reveals that:

- The dominance of conflict-based metaphors (opponent/attacker) reveals WHO's strategic choice to frame health challenges through culturally familiar combat imagery, particularly relevant during pandemic communications.
- The metaphorical landscape presents significant challenges for Arabic translations like: Combat metaphors may carry different cultural connotations that require

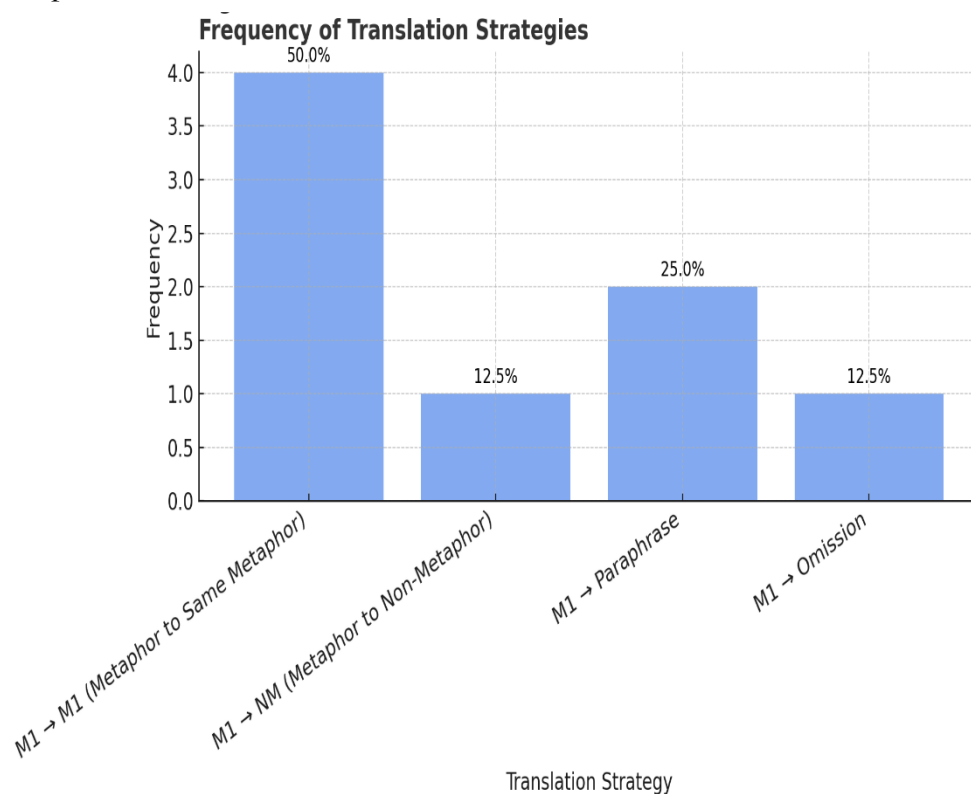
careful adaptation to not only maintain communicative effectiveness but also, to balance source text fidelity with cultural appropriateness.

-The secondary metaphors (moving entity, safety state) balance aggressive tone with protection concepts, and offer alternative conceptualisations for culturally sensitive contexts.

Table 2: Frequency of Translation Strategies

Translation Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Examples (Cf., Appendix. A)
M1 → M1	4	50.0%	Fight, team, sport, report
M1 → NM	1	12.5%	timeout
M1 → Paraphrase	2	25.0%	cheering/masking, obstacle
M1 → Omission	1	12.5%	Based on analysis in Appendix A

Graph 2 :



Note: Strategy frequencies in the analysis presented in Appendix A.

The data demonstrates that:

-Translators act as cultural mediators, not mere linguistic converters

-They navigate between global health communication standards and local cultural values, with cultural adaptation being the primary factor influencing translation decisions. The significant paraphrasing rate (25%) confirms that medical metaphors often require explicitation when direct cultural equivalents are absent.

-The balanced distribution between preservation and adaptation strategies exemplifies sophisticated translation practices in medical communication, crucial for effective medical public texts .

The quantitative results highlight the prevalence of sport/game metaphors in the selected WHO public health communications during the pandemic and shows a tendency towards direct metaphorical transfer (M1→M1) in the Arabic translations, although paraphrasing, non-metaphorical renderings, and omission also occur.

4.2 Qualitative Results

While the quantitative patterns provide an overview of translation tendencies, a detailed qualitative analysis of representative examples reveals the complex sociolinguistic factors underlying these strategic choices. Some of them are presented here in more detail to illustrate the translation strategies and sociolinguistic features.

Example 1: PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS TEAM SPORT (M1→M1)

•Source Text (ST) : "Be a champion in the fight against COVID-19" (Infographic slogan)

Figure1

**Be a champion in the fight
against COVID-19.**

30/7/2021

**COVID-19 is not taking a timeout.
Neither should you.**

Watch your favorite
games at home.



• https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/risk-communications/olympic_games_tile_30_7_1.jpg?sfvrsn=a1672b82_9

•Target Text (TT) Arabic: "كن بطلاً في مكافحة كوفيد-19" /kun baṭalān fī mukāfahatī kūfid-19/ •World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). نصائح للجمهور بشأن مرض فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19). Retrieved May 12, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

•Analysis: The strategy employed is M1→M1. The "champion" metaphor (associated with sports and excellence) is directly translated as بطل/baṭal/ which has a similar connotation in Arabic. This metaphor is combined with the concept of fight /مكافحة/mukāfahā/, which belongs to the more conventional war metaphor. Maintaining the sports metaphor suggests that the concept of becoming a "champion" in a collective effort is perceived as culturally understandable and motivating for the Arabic-speaking audience. The direct imperative structure ("Be" / "كن" - Kun) is also maintained, indicating a direct communication strategy.

Example 2: PREVENTION AS FAN SUPPORT (M1→Paraphrase/M1)
Figure 2

Cheering for your favorite athletes, players and teams? **Keep your mask on!**

30/7/2021

Cheering fans who may be infected run the risk of spreading respiratory droplets or aerosols of the COVID-19 virus and potentially infecting the people around them.

Cheer safely: wear a mask.



• World Health Organization. (2021, July 30). Cheering for your favorite athletes, players and teams? Keep your mask on! [Infographic]. WHO Advice for the Public. https://cdn.who.int/media/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/risk-communications/olympic_games_tile_30_7_3.jpg?sfvrsn=457135d_7

• (TT) "هل تشجع رياضيينك ولاعبيك وفرقك المفضلة؟ حافظ على ارتداء الكمامة: (Hal tushajji' riyāḍiyyīk wa lā'ibīk wa firāqak al-mufaḍḍalah? Ḥāfiẓ 'alā irtidā' al-kamāmah!)

- <https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

• Analysis: The strategy is arguably M1→Paraphrase or M1→M1 depending on interpretation. The metaphorical link between the preventive action (wearing a mask) and supporting a sports team "تشجع" (cheering) is preserved. The translation uses a rhetorical question followed by a direct instruction, mirroring the English structure. The choice to maintain this link suggests an assessment that the context of sports support is universal or relevant in Arab cultures to serve as an anchor for the health recommendation. This illustrates an attempt to render the message more accessible and less strictly medical, by incorporating a cultural framework associated with fun and communal involvement. (Categorised as a Paraphrase in Table 2, given the structural transformation and the less direct use of metaphor compared to the term (champion).

Example 3: COVID-19 AS OBSTACLE (M1→Paraphrase/NM)

- ST: Don't put off necessary medical appointments [Infographic]. WHO Advice for the Public. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

• (TT) Arabic: " لا تؤجل المواعيد الطبية الضرورية / lā tu'ajjil al-mawā'id al-ṭibbiyya al-ḍarūriyya /

- World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). نصائح للجمهور بشأن مرض فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19). Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

• Analysis: The strategy here is neutralisation (M1→NM) or paraphrase. The English phrasal verb "put off" carries an implicit metaphor where a task or appointment is an object being pushed away, suggesting an obstacle (the pandemic or fear) prompting procrastination. The Arabic translation "لا تؤجل" Do not postpone/defer) is a direct, non-metaphorical instruction. The nuance of the implicit obstacle is lost. This choice can be explained by several sociolinguistic factors:

- The pursuit of clarity and univocity in crucial health communication, avoiding potential ambiguities of an implicit metaphor;
- Possible cultural preference for more direct instructions in this context;
- The lack of an equally concise and common Arabic idiomatic equivalent for "put off" in this specific sense. Neutralisation here prioritises pragmatic clarity over metaphorical richness. (Classified as Paraphrase in Table 2).

Example 4: INFORMATION AS WEAPON/TOOL (M1→NM)

- ST: Mythbusters" (Section title)

- World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). Advice for the public. Retrieved January 31, 2025, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> (Section title on main page)
- TT: " تصحيح المفاهيم المغلوطة / taṣḥīḥ al-mafāhīm al-maḡlūṭa /
- World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). نصائح للجمهور بشأن مرض فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19). Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> (Section title on main page)
- Analysis: This is another case of neutralisation (M1→NM). The English term "Mythbusters" is a vivid and playful metaphor, evoking the action of "busting" or "destroying" myths, conceptualising correct information as a weapon or tool against lie. The Arabic translation opts for a literal and explanatory description: "Correction of misconceptions. This choice may be motivated by either the lack of an equally impactful and idiomatic Arabic equivalent for "Mythbusters"; a preference for a more formal and less colloquial register in official WHO communications in Arabic; or a desire to avoid any potentially aggressive or trivial connotations associated with buster in a serious health context. The translation prioritises informative function and formality over the original metaphorical impact.

Example 5: MISINFORMATION AS FAULT/CRIME (M1→M1)

- ST : "How to report misinformation" (Link text)
- World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). Advice for the public. Retrieved January 31, 2025, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> (Link text on main page)
- TT : " احم نفسك والآخرين من خلال الإبلاغ عن المعلومات الخاطئة / iḥmi nafsaka wa-l-ʿāḥarīn min ḥilāl al-iblāḡ ʿan al-maʿlūmāt al-ḥāṭiʿa / Protect yourself and others by reporting wrong information)
- World Health Organization. (2023, March 18). نصائح للجمهور بشأن مرض فيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19). Retrieved January 31, 2025, from <https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public> (Link text on main page)
- Analysis: The strategy is M1→M1. The verb "report" in English, in this context, implies signalling something problematic or harmful, akin to reporting a fault or incident. The Arabic translation uses "الإبلاغ عن" al-iblāḡ - which means "to report" or "to inform about" and retains this connotation of official action against a negative entity (misinformation). Interestingly, the Arabic translation adds an explicit justification ("Protect yourself and others...") not present in the concise source link text. This addition can be interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation aimed

at strengthening the motivation of the Arabic-speaking reader to perform the reporting action, by highlighting its direct benefit for personal and collective safety, which might be a persuasion strategy deemed more effective in this cultural context.

These examples illustrate the complexity of translational choices when facing metaphors. While some metaphors deemed universal or easily transposable (like those related to sports or reporting) are maintained ($M1 \rightarrow M1$), others that are more implicit or idiomatic (like "put off" or "Mythbusters") are neutralised ($M1 \rightarrow NM$) or paraphrased, likely for the sake of clarity, formality, or to avoid cultural transposition difficulties. The addition of explanatory content in some cases (Example 5) also suggests pragmatic adaptations aimed at maximising the message's impact on the target audience.

5. Discussion

The analysis of pandemic metaphors in WHO communications and their translation from English into Arabic reveals several important sociolinguistic and translational dynamics. This section interprets the previously presented results in light of our theoretical framework and initial research questions.

Our results indicate a notable tendency to use either metaphorical equivalence ($M1 \rightarrow M1$) or neutralisation ($M1 \rightarrow NM$), with an apparent absence of metaphorical substitution ($M1 \rightarrow M2$) or omission ($M1 \rightarrow \emptyset$) in our limited corpus. The maintenance of metaphors ($M1 \rightarrow M1$), observed particularly for concepts related to TEAM SPORTS ("team," "champion," "cheering") and reporting "report misinformation", suggests that these source conceptualisations were deemed sufficiently transparent, culturally acceptable, and potentially motivating for the Arabic-speaking audience. The use of the sports metaphor, less aggressive than the often criticised war metaphor (Garzone, 2021), could represent a deliberate attempt by WHO to promote a message of unity and positive engagement, a strategy considered transferable to the Arabic audience.

Conversely, neutralisation ($M1 \rightarrow NM$) was observed for more implicit or idiomatic metaphors in English, such as COVID-19 AS OBSTACLE (put off) or INFORMATION AS WEAPON/TOOL (Mythbusters). This choice to favour a literal or descriptive expression in Arabic can be interpreted through several sociolinguistic lenses. Firstly, it may reflect an application of the principle of clarity and ambiguity reduction, paramount in large-scale health communication (Al Shamsi et al., 2020), where immediate understanding takes precedence over stylistic richness. Secondly, it may stem from institutional translation norms (Toury, 1995) that often favour a

more formal and less figurative register, particularly in the official Arabic used by WHO, thus avoiding the potentially overly colloquial or playful nature of terms like "Mythbusters." Thirdly, the lack of direct and concise Arabic idiomatic equivalents for these specific expressions may have compelled translators to opt for paraphrase. The translation of "report misinformation" (Example 5) is noteworthy from a sociolinguistic standpoint. It represents a pragmatic adaptation strategy designed to enhance the persuasive impact of the message on the target audience by explicitly articulating the benefits of the recommended action ("Protect yourself and others..."). This approach may indicate an awareness of communicative norms and motivational techniques considered more effective within the Arab cultural context.

5.1 Implications

The findings confirm the complexity of metaphor translation highlighted by Schäffner (2004) and others, showing that simple transposition is not always possible or desirable. The use of alternative metaphors to WAR (such as SPORTS) in WHO's pandemic discourse corroborates observations on the diversification of metaphorical frameworks during the COVID-19 crisis (Abdel-Raheem, 2021), although the war metaphor remains present ("fight" / "مكافحة").

The observed tendency towards neutralisation of certain metaphors corresponds to broader challenges in English–Arabic medical translation, particularly the management of idiomatic disparities and the imperative of ensuring clarity for heterogeneous audiences (Al-Ahdal, 2025; Almahasees, 2024). The systematic neutralisation of potentially engaging or memorable metaphors—such as "Mythbusters"—raises pertinent questions regarding communicative effectiveness. Although clarity is enhanced, the persuasive force and memorability inherent in the original metaphor may be diminished. This has direct implications for intercultural health communication: a translation that is technically accurate yet semantically attenuated through metaphor neutralisation may be less effective in shaping public health behaviours. Moreover, the decision between retaining a potentially foreign metaphor and neutralising it—thereby sanitising the message—reflects the enduring tension between "domestication" and "foreignization" (Venuti, 1995). Within the institutional framework of the WHO, there appears to be a distinct preference towards domestication, achieved either through neutralisation or through the adoption of metaphors perceived as universal. Such an approach likely seeks to moderate the risk of misunderstanding or cultural dissonance in

multilingual and multicultural medical communication contexts.

5.2 Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysed corpus is relatively narrow, focusing primarily on a single webpage and its related infographics. A more expansive examination that included other WHO materials, such as reports, speeches, or technical guidelines, might have revealed different patterns or strategies. Second, the processes of metaphor identification and strategy classification inevitably rely on the researchers' interpretation, although informed by established analytical frameworks such as the MIP and recognised strategy typologies. Third, in the absence of direct input from the translators or evidence from reception studies, any attribution of translation decisions to specific sociolinguistic factors remains speculative. At best, we can make informed inferences about the translators' likely intentions or the constraints they may have perceived.

5.3 Recommendations

The study opens up multiple potential avenues for future research. It would be pertinent to expand the corpus to include a wider variety of texts and pandemic metaphors. Comparative analyses with other language pairs involving Arabic or other WHO target languages would also be insightful. Reception studies with Arabic-speaking audiences could empirically assess the understanding and impact of different metaphor translation strategies. Finally, interviews with translators working for organisations like WHO could provide valuable insights into their decision-making processes and the sociolinguistic challenges they face daily.

In sum, the translation of WHO pandemic metaphors from English into Arabic emerges as a multifaceted process shaped by the interaction of linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and institutional factors. Decisions between maintaining equivalence and opting for neutralisation carry significant implications for the communication and reception of vital medical messages across diverse populations.

The findings lead to several practical recommendations for translators and institutions involved in intercultural health communication:

1. **Enhanced Cultural Awareness:** Translators and health communication writers should recognise that metaphors are culturally situated and that their translation or neutralisation can carry significant implications for meaning, tone, and audience reception.
2. **Rigorous Contextual Evaluation:** Decisions to retain, adapt, or neutralise a

metaphor should follow a careful contextual analysis that weighs not only clarity, but also the potential persuasive power and memorability of the metaphorical image.

3. Consideration of Culturally Resonant Equivalents: When confronted with a challenging source metaphor, translators should explore metaphorical equivalents in the target language that resonate culturally (M1→M2 strategy), rather than defaulting to neutralisation, in order to sustain audience engagement.

4. Pre-testing and Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Wherever possible, translations containing key metaphors should be pre-tested with representative samples of the target audience to assess comprehension and acceptability. Stronger collaboration among public health specialists, linguists, and culturally competent translators can enhance both communicative accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

7. Conclusion

The paper has examined the sociolinguistic dimensions of the medical translation of pandemic metaphors from English into Arabic in the public communications of the World Health Organization (WHO). Drawing on a corpus of parallel texts from the WHO website, the analysis identified a range of conceptual metaphors, extending beyond the familiar war metaphor to include frameworks such as the pandemic response as a team sport, illness as an obstacle, and information or misinformation as an object or a weapon.

The examination of translation strategies revealed a predominance of metaphorical equivalence (M1→M1) and neutralisation (M1→NM). Metaphors tended to be retained when the source concept was perceived as transparent and culturally acceptable in Arabic. By contrast, neutralisation was more common for metaphors that were implicit, idiomatic, or potentially problematic in terms of clarity or formal register. These choices appear to be shaped by a complex interplay of sociolinguistic factors, including the pursuit of pragmatic clarity, adherence to cultural and institutional norms, linguistic constraints, and audience adaptation strategies. By focusing on the English–Arabic language pair in the context of a major health crisis, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on metaphor translation in institutional discourse. It demonstrates that metaphor translation in this setting is not merely a semantic operation but a process of sociocultural mediation, requiring translators to balance fidelity to the source with the

imperative of ensuring reception, resonance, and effectiveness among diverse audiences.

Ultimately, adopting a sociolinguistic perspective on metaphor translation is essential for enhancing both the effectiveness and the equity of medical communication. As organisations such as the WHO continue to play a critical role in disseminating public health information, sustained attention to the linguistic and cultural specificities of their translated messages will remain indispensable for reaching and engaging all sections of the population.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Detailed Analysis of Selected Pandemic Metaphors (WHO)

This appendix documents in WHO materials (

Identified Metaphors and Sources

1. PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS TEAM SPORT / GAME

- Source Infographic 1: "Be a champion in the fight against COVID-19"
- English Text: "Be a champion in the fight against COVID-19. COVID-19 is not taking a timeout. Neither should you. Watch your favorite games at home."
- URL: https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/risk-communications/olympic_games_tile_30_7_1.jpg?sfvrsn=a1672b82_9
- Date: 30/7/2021 (Visible on image)
- Underlying Concept: Combines sports ("champion," "timeout," "games") and war ("fight") metaphors. Individual excellence within a collective struggle.
- Source Infographic 2: "We're all on the same team..."
- English Text: "We're all on the same team in bringing an end to the spread of COVID-19. Outdoor venues are safer than indoor places. If you have plans to attend sporting events or gatherings, do your part and score with prevention measures."
- URL: https://www.who.int/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/risk-communications/olympic_games_tile_30_7_2.jpg?sfvrsn=3f91458a_7

- Date: 30/7/2021 (Visible on image)
 - Underlying Concept: Collective sporting effort against the pandemic.
 - Source Infographic 3: "Cheering for your favorite athletes..."
 - English Text: "Cheering for your favorite athletes, players and teams? Keep your mask on! Cheering fans who may be infected run the risk of spreading respiratory droplets or aerosols of the COVID-19 virus and potentially infecting the people around them. Cheer safely: wear a mask."
 - URL: https://cdn.who.int/media/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/risk-communications/olympic_games_tile_30_7_3.jpg?sfvrsn=457135d_7
 - Date: 30/7/2021 (Visible on image)
 - Underlying Concept: Equates preventive action (masking) with fan support.
2. COVID-19 AS OBSTACLE / BARRIER (Implies Source Infographic 4: "Don't put off necessary medical appointments")
- * English Text: "DON'T PUT OFF NECESSARY MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS. Life has to continue even where COVID-19 is spreading. Here's how to stay safe." (Title and introductory text from infographic)
 - * URL: https://cdn.who.int/media/images/default-source/health-topics/coronavirus/dont-put-off-medical-appointments.jpg?sfvrsn=545773bb_18_n
 - * Date: (Undated on infographic, retrieved January 31, 2025)
 - * Underlying Concept: Pandemic as an obstacle to accessing care, implied by the act of 'putting off'.
3. INFORMATION AS WEAPON / TOOL (Against Misinformation)
- Source: WHO Page "Advice for the public" - Section Title
 - English Text: "Mythbusters"
 - URL: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
 - Date: Page last updated March 18, 2023 (Consulted January 31, 2025)
 - Underlying Concept: Correct information as a tool/weapon to destroy myths.
 - Source: WHO Page "Advice for the public"
 - English Text: "How to report misinformation" mobilising all populations.
 - URL: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
 - Date: Page last updated March 18, 2023 (Consulted January 31, 2025)
 - Underlying Concept: Misinformation as a fault/crime to be reported.

Appendix B

English - Arabic Alignment and Strategy Analysis

Example Ref	English Metaphor / Context	Arabic Translation (Source: WHO /ar/ page)	Strategy (Analysis)
Infogr. 1	PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS TEAM SPORT ("champion")	كن بطلاً في مكافحة كوفيد-19 (Kun baṭalan fī mukāfaḥat Kūfīd-19)	M1→M1 (Equivalence)
Infogr. 2	PANDEMIC RESPONSE AS TEAM SPORT ("same team")	كلنا فريق واحد في وضع حد لانتشار كوفيد-19 (Kullunā farīq wāḥid(...	M1→M1 (Equivalence)
Infogr. 3	PREVENTION AS FAN SUPPORT ("cheering")	هل تشجع رياضيينك...؟ حافظ على ارتداء الكمامة! (Hal tushajji' riyāḍiyyīk?...)	M1→M1 (Equivalence)
Infogr. 4	COVID-19 AS OBSTACLE ("put off")	لا تؤجل المواعيد الطبية الضرورية (Lā tu'ajil(...	M1→NM (Neutralisation)
Section	INFORMATION AS WEAPON/TOOL ("Mythbusters")	تصحيح المفاهيم المغلوطة (Taṣḥīḥ al-mafāhīm al-maghlūṭa)	M1→NM (Neutralisation)
Link	MISINFORMATION AS FAULT/CRIME ("report misinformation")	احم نفسك والآخرين من خلال الإبلاغ عن المعلومات الخاطئة (Iḥmi nafsak... al-iblāgh 'an(...	M1→M1 (Equivalence)