

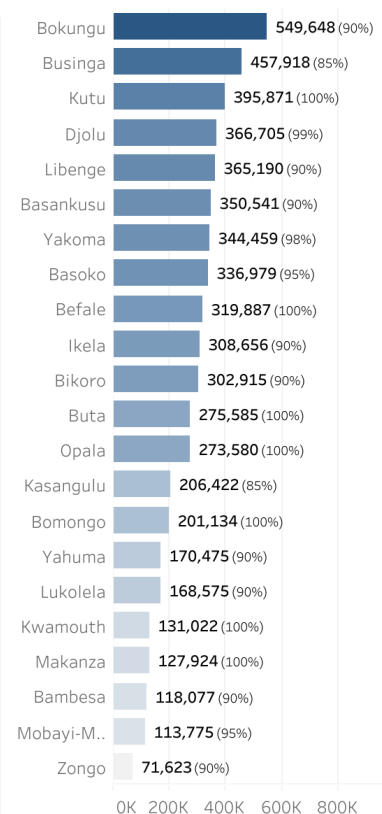
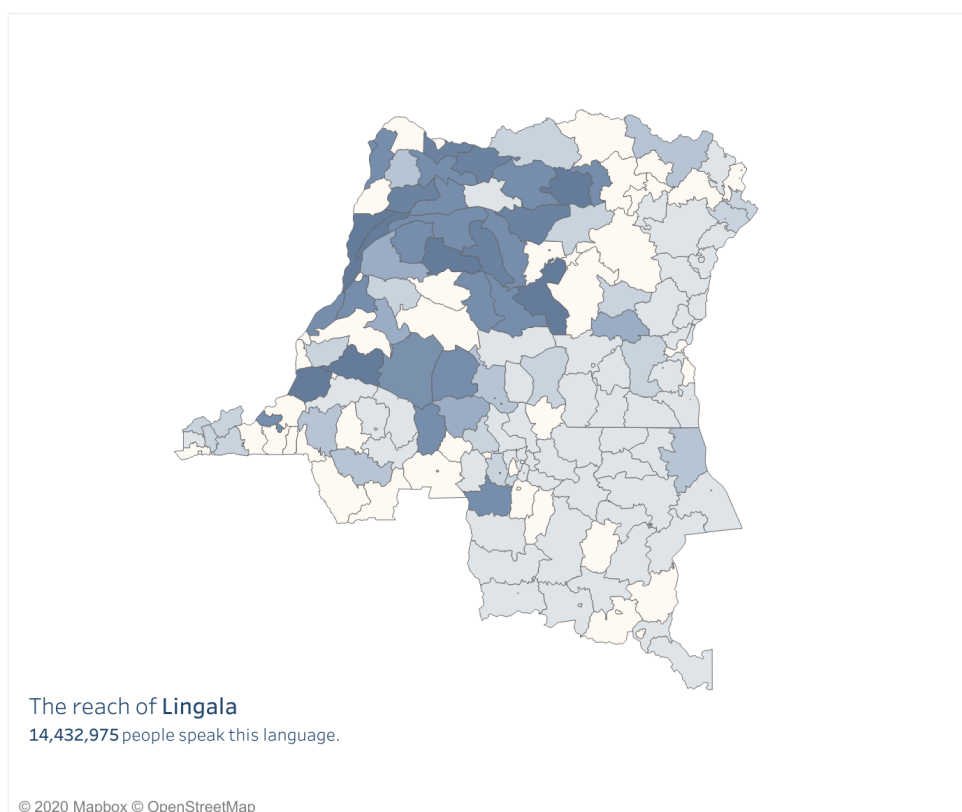


# TERMINOLOGY IN HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

*Communicating difficult concepts in DRC requires  
linguistic awareness and practical tools*



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TWB Language map of DRC <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-map-of-drc-interactive-en/>

## Global concepts, local terms

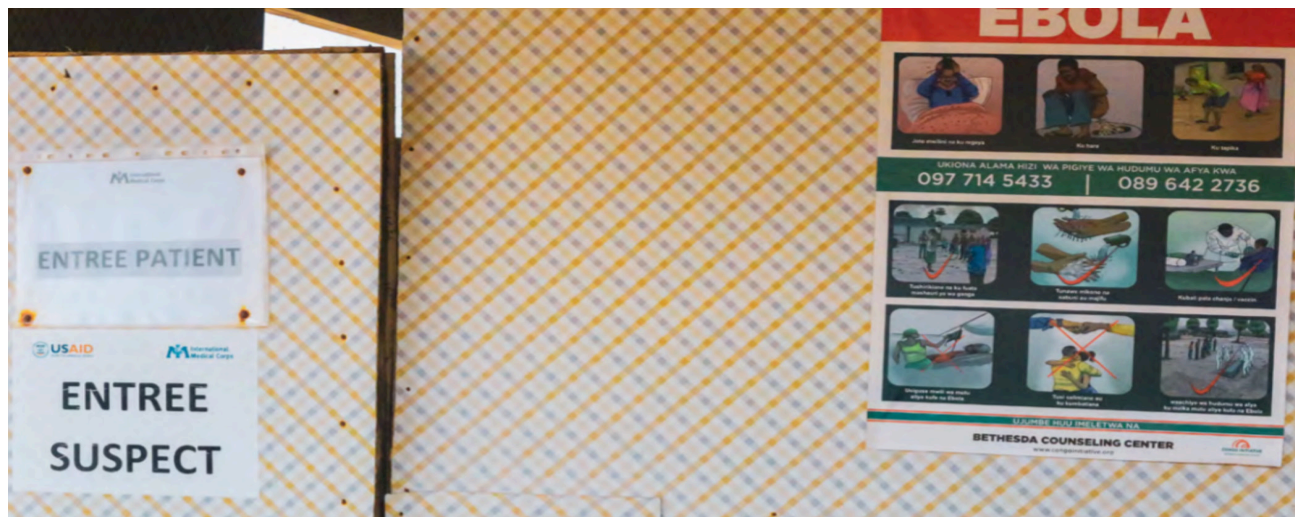
DRC is very linguistically diverse, with over 200 languages spoken. This can pose a challenge to those working to support communities. This is especially true when dealing with health crises that threaten people's lives. Only information in words that people understand can save lives.

Health communication often draws on foreign terms and concepts, especially from English or French. However, these terms are not understood by all speakers of Congolese national and local languages. Those with better access to education and humanitarian services may understand such terms more easily. Yet most people, especially women and older people, understand local terms best. An over-reliance on technical jargon can create new barriers, leading to fear and distrust.

Health communicators are acutely aware of this. They must communicate complex health information to local communities using appropriate language and terminology that those communities understand.

To be effective, health communicators need and deserve tools that help them to communicate complex concepts consistently, appropriately and accurately in local languages.

*TWB's terminology guides provide cultural background and linguistic context for people who work in health programs. These guides support the **TWB Glossary for DRC**, which contains more than 400 health-related terms. We compiled and verified these terms through feedback from our community of translators and field testing with partners including IFRC. The glossary is available in five languages online and offline via our mobile app <https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/drc>.*



*The choice of terminology can create confusion, mistrust and fear: in this photograph taken in Beni, the entrance labelled “suspect” in large bold letters immediately creates an association with the suspect in a criminal enquiry*

## Terms evoking war and criminality are frightening and dehumanising, and stigmatize Ebola patients

Health responders often use terms evoking warfare, coercion and violence when talking about preventing the spread of a disease. This fails to recognize the active role of communities in controlling the disease and can create confusion, mistrust and fear.

Eastern DRC has long been the scene of conflict, violence and abuse. In such contexts, terms such as *riposte* (“fighting back”) and *résistance communautaire* (“community resistance”) to talk about the response to the disease can reinforce the idea of a struggle between the community and health responders.

It is important to use language that respects the humanity of patients and their families. Where patients are referred to as *cas* (“cases”) and those who refuse care are branded *évadés* (“fugitives”) the connotation of criminality deepens mistrust.

Terms such as *vainqueur* (“winner” or “survivor”) used in the context of the Ebola response can perpetuate the idea of those who have died as having “lost” or not fought hard enough. Such

associations can frighten people and suggest they are losing a battle, leading to feelings of guilt and failure.

Community engagement efforts need to draw on appropriate terminology that avoids such associations and restores the dignity of affected communities.

## Avoid technical vocabulary and acronyms

Communication about health needs to be understandable to everyone in the community, including those with low health literacy. Using technical words or acronyms without explaining them increases the risk of misunderstandings.

Vocabulary such as a “negative” or “positive” test can confuse people. It seems illogical to many that a test showing that they do not have Ebola or COVID-19 could be “negative” when in fact this is a positive outcome for them. A clearer explanation is needed.

It is best to avoid acronyms such as PPE (personal protective equipment), instead explaining the concept in easily understandable terms.



## Examples of problematic terms and some suggested alternatives

Commonly used term	Suggested alternative
<i>Alternatives to violent terminology</i>	
community resistance	mistrust from the community
fugitive case	person refusing treatment
suspect case	person who is believed to have the illness but has not been tested
<i>Alternatives to stigmatizing/dehumanizing terminology</i>	
case	person who has the disease
alert case	person reported as having symptoms of the illness
confirmed case	person confirmed as having the disease by a laboratory test
<i>Alternatives to technical vocabulary</i>	
viral load	amount of virus in the blood or other body fluid
cephalalgia	headache
discharge	patient leaves the facility supported by medical staff
incubation period	time between infection with illness and the first symptoms

Source: TWB Health glossary for DRC

### Hidden meanings can be acquired in translation

Words that seem neutral may be loaded with meaning in different languages. In our research, we found examples of direct translations of technical expressions being perceived as denigrating. For instance, in Nande the term “high-risk contact” is often understood to mean someone who has HIV. Similarly, “contact of contacts” can be understood to mean someone who sells sex for money.

For this reason, it is important to field-test messaging, materials and terminology with community members and speakers of target languages to ensure that meanings are clear

and unambiguous

### Images and audio can help communication

Messaging around health is often shared through written messaging shared in communities. It is important firstly to make sure this messaging is in plain language, with correct terminology and in local languages. However there are other ways of sharing information and aiding comprehension. Supplementing written text with images and using audiovisual materials including recorded verbal messaging and videos, can remove ambiguities and ensure better communication. This supports access to information for the most vulnerable, including those with lower literacy levels.

## Tips: How can I communicate a difficult concept when there is no word in my language?

### 1. Define technical words - especially when you first use them

Example: "You are asymptomatic; this means you have the illness but not the symptoms".

### 2. Use a term known by the community

Example: In Kinshasa, "bonbonne" (gas container) is often used in Lingala to describe a medical respirator.

### 3. Use images to show the meaning

Example: Show a picture of the part of the body you are talking about or to explain a difficult concept.

## How to use the TWB Glossary in the field



Domaine

	Français	Alternative suggérée	Swahili Congolais	Kinande	Lingala	Anglais
Général	bénévole/volontaire		anayejitolea	omuhinji	moto oyo azali ko zala mosala na posa na ye moko mpe azali ko zela lifuti te.	volunteer
Général	besoins		mahitaji	obwagha	ba mposa	needs
Santé	bien-être		kufanyikiwa	obunyaghasa	bozali malamamu	wellbeing
Santé	bouche		kinywa	obuno	munoko	mouth
Santé	brancard		kipoyo	akatsingo	mbeto ba memelaka bato ya bokono	stretcher
Santé	caca (excrément)		mavi (uchafu kutoka tumboni)	amabi	nyeyi	poo (excrements)
Santé	cadavre		maiti	ekinda	Ebembe	cadaver
Santé	cas	personne malade	mgonjwa	omukoni oyuwaviriminywa kwa kwire obulwere	moto oyo azali na bokono	case
Santé	cas alerte	personne malade signalé comme ayant des signes	mgonjwa ambaye hali yake ya zaniwa kuwa na virusi na ambaye wahusika waliitikia kuenda kwenyi kituo cha matunzo	omukoni wolwima	moto oyo azali na bilembo ya bokono	alert case
Santé	cas confirmé	personne confirmé malade par un test au laboratoire	mgonjwa anayehakikishwa kupatwa na ugonjwa kisha kipimo	omukoni oy'akwir'ebola	moto oyo basili ko kanga na bokono	confirmed case

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1. Access <https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/drc/> on your smartphone
2. Bookmark the link in your navigator
3. You can now access this link even without internet when you are in the field

## Further resources

**TWB health glossary for DRC** ([web app](#))

**TWB global COVID-19 glossary** ([web app](#))

**Language data for the Democratic Republic of Congo** ([language mapping](#))

**How to talk about Ebola** ([guidance note](#))

**How to talk about Health** ([guidance note](#))

**Missing the mark? People in eastern DRC need information on Ebola in a language they understand** ([Goma rapid needs assessment](#))

**We need to talk. Effective Ebola risk communication requires respect and transparency and remains as vital as ever** ([Beni research report](#))

## Contact

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to discuss overall language services and resources for communicating with communities in need in DRC.

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