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Unity in Adversity: Multilingual Crisis Translation and Emergency Linguistics in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jeconiah Louis Dreisbach^{1*} and Sharon Mendoza-Dreisbach²

¹Filipino Department, De La Salle University, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, 1004, Philippines

²School of Business, Skyline University College, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Abstract:

In this globalised era, technological innovations in mobility and travel brought in international and intercultural contact which historically exposed the world population to diseases of pandemic levels. As we are already living in multilingual and multicultural societies, this contact amongst peoples necessitates the need for multilingual knowledge and educational materials production pertaining to public health measures. As established in recent literature on multilingual crisis translation initiatives from China and the Philippines, this discursive piece proposes that emergency language services should be formally institutionalised in public health organisations, most certainly in crisis prevention, responses, and mitigation. The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the need for such expertise and language experts all over the world are currently proposing to establish a new field in linguistics to tackle public health translation in emergency situations – emergency linguistics.

Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis translation, Emergency linguistics, Multilingualism, Public health, Mitigation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Linguistic Barriers in Health Communication

The emergence and immediate spread of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the world's population are testing the linguistic limits of the world's 7,117 living languages [1], most especially on minority languages that have not undergone the process of intellectualisation as major political efforts in language development mainly focus on the dominant languages of a country. Moreover, technological advancements globalised our cultures and societies as it allowed us mobility due to the relatively low costs of air travel. Health authorities are suddenly braving into intercultural crisis communication attributable to the multilingual and multicultural factors that compose an internationalised society [2]. Public health experts in doctor-patient communication recognise that miscommunication brought upon by linguistic barriers are life-threatening situations for patients who are unable to express their symptoms in a second or foreign language [3]. This discursive piece presents the grassroots efforts to mitigate the increase of COVID-19 cases in international and multilingual communities through crisis translation. The linguistic [4] and creative [5] turns in public

health offer alternative methods and approaches in knowledge production that are useful in the mobilisation of healthcare workers in a health crisis.

1.2. Multilingual Crisis Translation in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Li, Xie, Ai, and Li [6] stated that there is a need to go beyond English-mediated knowledge production to combat the COVID-19 crisis at the grassroots level. They suggested an “epistemological shift from the global north to the global south where multilingual realities form thousands of years of history and civilisation, and where indigenous knowledge constitutes the essence of guiding principles embedded in social practice.” Beyond health education through the mother tongue of the interlocutors, acknowledging multilingual realities and translation of COVID-19 mitigation materials to the readers' first language will introduce practices that are closer to their own social and cultural sensibilities.

In Wuhan, the globally-recognised source of the disease, crisis managers identified that translation was an underdeveloped tool in managing the disease outbreak at the time when foreigners were allowed to leave the city in January. In an effort to mitigate the increase of COVID-19 cases from people who came from the city, its municipal government deployed government and external volunteer translators to educate the local population and affected foreign nationals on

* Address correspondence to this author at Department of Filipino, De La Salle University, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, 1004, Philippines;
E-mail: jeconiah.dreisbach@dlsu.edu.ph

preventive measures such as social distancing, self-isolation, and the wearing of masks, among other initiatives [2].

To serve the international community in Wuhan, a necessity for multilingual logistics communication, an area in sociolinguistics that has been sparsely explored, also emerged from their crisis response. Crisis managers found that for their volunteer translators to efficiently translate COVID-19 education materials, the municipal government assigned them to context-specific translation work that is related to their specialisations, specifically on teaching, business, and public management in the English, Portuguese, and Spanish languages. Beyond being mediators, these translators became actual healthcare front-liners in the aspect of multilingual crisis communication for their language competencies afforded them the opportunity to provide emergency language services [7].

As the disease outbreak reached Shanghai, multilingual translation efforts were immediately organized by university student volunteers in cooperation with local community health workers who are serving multicultural communities in the metropolitan area. Foreign language students in local universities were in constant close collaboration with health authorities in providing health education materials to the grassroots multilingual communities of the city, which enhanced emergency language services and crisis communication, particularly in the Arabic, English, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish languages [8].

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the need to include emergency language management practices in crisis prevention and preparation strategies. As soon as the disease became an outbreak in China, a group of linguists all over the country established the Epidemic Language Service Corps that provided standardised public emergency language services. As of this writing, the said group already published health education materials such as the Hubei Dialects Glossary for

Fighting the Epidemic, the Foreign Language Glossary for Fighting the Epidemic, and Concise Chinese for Fighting the Epidemic. Li, Zhao, and He [9] regarded that the construction of a language emergency service is a practical policy for local and national governments to develop a knowledge base that could be utilised in outbreak mitigation measures and mobilisation mechanism.

1.3. Regional Reconciliation in Collective Translation Efforts

Across the West Philippine Sea and due to its proximity with China, the Philippines was heavily plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic as well. With 184 living languages spoken by the 105 million population of the country [1], there had always been ethnic tension between the dominant and minority ethnolinguistic groups. To emphasise their regional identities, non-Tagalog ethnolinguistic groups frequently prefer to speak their native languages in most linguistic situations in the public sphere, even health communication initiatives by national and local governments [10]. This ethnolinguistic conflict is still widespread among groups that are greatly critical of the Tagalog-based Philippine national language [11].

Despite linguistic and cultural divergences, linguists and translators in the country united in the efforts to address the multilingual crisis translation challenges brought by the pandemic. The organisation *Language Warriors PH* was established as a meta-translation initiative that organises volunteer translators across the country and translates COVID-19 education materials into Philippine languages. In 10 thematic domains, including physical and mental health, 927 health education materials have been translated into 70 Philippine languages, including Filipino Sign Language and Filipino Gay Lingo to make it inclusive in the deaf-mute and gay communities [12]. Fig. (1) shows the tracking of translated health education materials in the languages mentioned.

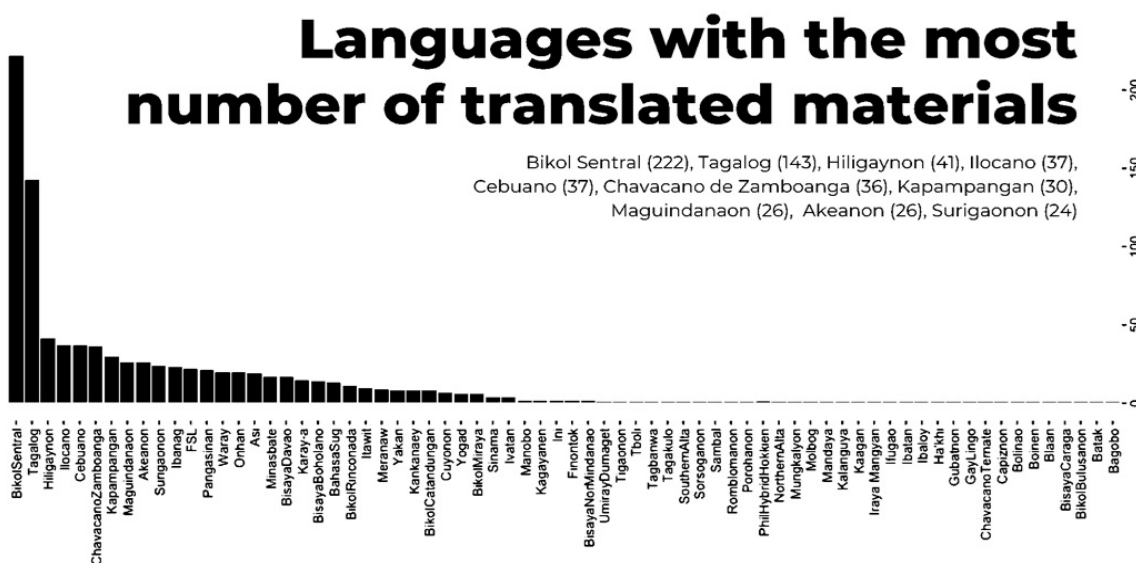


Fig. (1). A tracker of the health education materials translated by Language Warriors PH volunteers in 70 Philippine languages [12].

Proponents of the volunteer translation organisation recognise that “production of materials is one aspect of the overall aim to push for inclusive and equal access to information, but dissemination is an equally important part of the goal” in COVID-19 mitigation. Furthermore, the group considers that having access to accurate and quality information is part of the Filipinos’ basic human rights. As the organisers of the group are linguistics professors of the University of the Philippines, the country’s national university, they also aim to systematically gather their experiences as data in developing policy recommendations for emergency language management services [12].

Students from the Philippine Science High School made

efforts in developing child-friendly COVID-19 educational materials that are available to the general public. For it to be inclusive, the multi-campus science-oriented high school also translated their story and colouring books in various Philippine and Asian languages to fulfill the need to educate children coming from various Philippine and Asian ethnicities [13].

As of the publication of this piece, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the United States government [14], the European Commission [15], and the Department of Health [16] of the Australian government, among others, have established multilingual educational resources for the migrant minority populations of their respective countries (Fig. 2).



Fig. (2). The cover page of a story colouring book developed by the Philippine Science High School students generally available to the public in various Philippine and Asian languages.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating Emergency Language Services in Public Health Crises Responses

In this globalised era, technological innovations in mobility and travel brought in international and intercultural contact which historically exposed the world population to diseases of pandemic levels. As we are already living in multilingual and multicultural societies, this contact amongst peoples necessitates the need for multilingual knowledge and educational materials production pertaining to public health measures. As established in recent literature on multilingual crisis translation initiatives from China and the Philippines, we propose that emergency language services should be formally institutionalised in public health organisations, most certainly in crisis prevention, responses, and mitigation.

Crisis translation as an area in translation studies is in its infancy as it has only emerged in the past decade due to the need to respond to multilingual areas severely affected by natural and man-made disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the need for such expertise and language experts all over the world are currently proposing to establish a new field in linguistics to tackle public health translation in emergency situations – emergency linguistics [17, 18].

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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