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Mobilizing foreign language students for multilingual crisis translation in Shanghai

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Abstract: This paper examines the multilingual translation efforts of a group of university student volunteers during the COVID-19 outbreak in Shanghai. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of the volunteer team leader, team members, and a local community health worker. Findings identified time constraints, limited language proficiency, and limited technical knowledge as the major challenges confronting the university volunteers. In order to overcome the challenges, they worked in close collaboration and used translingual and network strategies to facilitate prompt and high-quality crisis translation. Findings suggest that foreign language university students in local universities may serve as readily available multilingual resources and can be mobilized in prompt response to the grassroots multilingual needs of the local community in times of crisis. The paper ends with implications for measures and strategies to enhance effective emergency language service and crisis communication for global multilingual cities.

Keywords: multilingual crisis communication, foreign language students as volunteer translators, COVID-19, global multilingual cities

1 Introduction

When public health crises break out in multilingual and multicultural societies, there is an urgent need to ensure people from diverse linguacultural groups have equal and timely access to public health information to ensure successful containment (O'Brien and Federici 2020; Piller 2020). This was one of the many challenges faced in Shanghai during the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak in February and March, 2020. Among Shanghai's total population of 24 million, there are 172,000 foreign residents who study, work and live in Shanghai. Their top 10 countries of origin are Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Germany, United

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Kingdom, Canada, United States, Australia, and France (Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2020).

In contrast to the multilingual composition of foreign residents, the foreign language capacities of Chinese people are far less diverse, with English as almost the only foreign language that Chinese can speak at varying proficiency levels. Among the total of 416 million of foreign language learners in China, 93.8% learn English exclusively, and 7.1% of the population have learned Russian, 2.5% Japanese, while only 0.3% reported learning any other foreign languages including German, French, Spanish, Arabic, and others (Wei and Su 2012; Zhang in press; see also Zhang & Wu, this issue). The structural imbalance is reflected by popular terms used by the general public: English is referred to as the ‘big language’ (大语种) and all other foreign languages as ‘small languages’ (小语种), even though some of the non-English languages are not small at all (Zheng and Guo 2019).

In recent years, public service departments in Shanghai have noted the problem of equating ‘foreigners’ with ‘English speakers’. For example, officials from Shanghai Pudong International Airport observed that only using English could not effectively communicate with tourists from non-Anglophone countries (Shanghai Foreign Education Press 2017). In an attempt to address these multilingual needs, the Shanghai Municipal Language Commission built up a multilingual service system to provide public service information on transportation, hotels, restaurants, tourist sights, and emergencies in five languages (i.e., English, Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish) in 2017 and published *The Shanghai Multilingual Handbook of Public Information* in these five languages in the same year (Zhang and Zhao 2020).

Despite these multilingual public services in Shanghai, however, when COVID-19 broke out, the general information available to the public could not meet the more specified multilingual needs of local hospitals and communities when they had to communicate important information about disease control and prevention measures to foreign residents and visitors. In response to the public emergency, a number of foreign language major students from the local universities in Shanghai quickly assembled and took the initiative to conduct crisis translation work. The present study focuses on the translation experiences of a group of these translators by asking what challenges they met and how they handled crisis translation during the COVID-19 outbreak. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications of this study for effective emergency language service and crisis communication in the future.

2 The study

The group of volunteer translators involved in the present study was all foreign language major students (at undergraduate and postgraduate levels) and teachers at the College of Foreign Languages and Literature, Fudan University, a key comprehensive university in Shanghai. There are more than 1200 students enrolled in the seven foreign language major programs of English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. In addition, the College hosts a Multilingual Learning Center to offer a variety of modern language courses for the whole university, including Arabic, Danish, Italian, Modern Hebrew, and Portuguese.

A total of 67 students and teachers participated in the volunteer work upon requests from the local community and hospitals. They translated and compiled the *Community Visiting Questionnaire* to communicate quarantine measures for local community workers, and *Frequently Asked Questions in the Inquiry of COVID-19 Suspected Cases* to be used in the local hospitals' Fever Clinic, as well as *The Notification for Foreign Visitors*. These works were undertaken in 10 foreign languages including Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Russian, and Spanish. *The Community Visiting Questionnaire* was made into pamphlets dubbed as 口袋书 [pocketbook]. In addition to the written form, the volunteers also made short audio clips in English, Japanese, and Korean to advocate control measures on how to wash one's hands and how to dispose used face masks. The audio clips were broadcasted through a public announcement system in the neighborhood where foreign residents live.

Two research questions guided the present inquiry: (1) What challenges did the volunteer translators meet in their multilingual translation service provision? (2) What strategies did they use to overcome these challenges? To answer the questions, data were collected from eight volunteer translators and one community worker through semi-structured interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

3 Challenges in COVID-19 crisis translation

The student volunteers reported three main challenges, namely time constraints, limited language proficiency, and limited technical knowledge.

The first and foremost difficulty was the urgency of the task. P9, the community worker, explained why translations were needed in the first place:

Table 1: Overview of interview participants.

Participant	Gender	Program of study	Role
P1	Female	Master student in Russian	Student counselor, organizer
P2	Female	Doctoral student in English	Student counselor, team leader
P3	Male	Master student in Japanese	Japanese translation team leader
P4	Female	Master student in Korean	Korean translation team member
P5	Female	Lecturer in Arabic	Arabic translator
P6	Female	Undergraduate student in Russian	Russian translation team member
P7	Female	Undergraduate student in Spanish	Spanish translation team leader
P8	Male	Undergraduate student in Spanish	Spanish translation team member
P9	Female	/	Local community worker

经过前期社区排查工作，辖区内的档高小区有许多来自各个国家的外国居民，仅用英语没法有效沟通。在疫情防控期间，希望能得到更有针对性的多语支持，就联系到了你们外文学院。

Previously during our close inspection of the communities, we found a large number of foreign residents from non-Anglophone countries who live in our neighborhoods. Only using English could not communicate with them effectively. During the disease control period, we wanted to get more specific multilingual support. That’s why we contacted the College of Foreign Languages and Literature.

In response, the students quickly assembled into a translation team. P2, P3, and P4 all mentioned that they were only given 3–4 h to finish the first round of translations. P1, the organizer of the multilingual volunteer team, described the complexity involved in the multiple negotiations with different sectors:

困难就是，语种太分散了，我们要挨个对接，就相当于我做一个中间人，同学们翻译好之后，我再各自分发给各个专业的老师帮我们校对，然后我再联系一个专门负责手册制作的同同学，然后让他去制作手册，然后这两边手册制作完之后，我要再发给各个语种同学，让他们再校对一遍，其实中间这些交流沟通其实浪费不少时间。

The difficulty is that the languages are so scattered that I have to contact individuals one by one. It’s like I’m the coordinator. When the students finished their translation, I would send the work to teachers from all different language divisions for a further check. Then I had to send the checked work to a student who took charge of the production. When the pamphlet was formatted, I needed to send it to students from the different languages and asked them to proofread for the final draft. The process was quite time-consuming.

Another challenge arose from the quickly evolving crisis situation and the fact that China was the first country to experience the COVID-19 pandemic and the relevant terminology did not yet exist in other languages. As P1 pointed out:

三月份的时候他们这种提醒性的文本很少，基本上报道说的都是我们中国武汉怎么样，有很多关于我们中国的疫情，但是他们没有提醒自己的国民要干什么，所以那时候翻译的文本可以参考的比较少。

In early March, their [=other countries] warning documents were scanty. Most news reports focused on the situation in Wuhan and the outbreak in China. But they did not give any warning to their own citizens on how to deal with the virus. So during that time, the texts that we could draw on were quite few.

The above excerpt highlights the spatial (multiple languages) and temporal dimension (different phase of development) in urgent crisis communication, and thus a high level of organization and management was crucial to facilitate the project.

Second, the student volunteers encountered a number of linguistic challenges. Many of the volunteers were undergraduate students who had only studied the target language for about two or three years. They expressed their concerns over their foreign accents (P4, P5), insufficient ability to discuss specificities of daily life in the target language (P6), and the naturalness or transparency of their translation to target language users (P7, P8).

In addition to the lack of individual linguistic competence, cultural appropriateness was considered another major challenge. P3 discussed the use of honorifics when he translated *the N. for Foreign Visitors* into Japanese:

特别是日语中关于敬语的问题，我们在告知书当中是不是要用敬语，然后还有一些日语中不太喜欢说“你”这个代词，但是在日语当中翻译的时候，如果不用“你”的话，感觉表示不是很明确。

A particular problem is with the honorifics in Japanese. We wondered if we should use honorifics in translating the Notification. The Japanese don't like to use the pronoun "you", but if the translation doesn't use "you", the instruction is not clear enough.

Similar difficulties were mentioned by volunteers of Korean (P4) and Russian translation (P6). This means that the volunteers did not have the high levels of intercultural awareness that is described as desirable in the literature on crisis communication (Cadwell 2020; O'Brien and Cadwell 2017).

Furthermore, although the student volunteers possessed basic multilingual abilities, they were not equipped with adequate public health knowledge. All of them mentioned the lack of medical knowledge as one great obstacle. For instance, P4 recounted:

首先我们平时翻译的内容它都是比较偏文学或者是之类的内容，但是这一个有点偏医学的，不在我们所学范围之内。一些专有名词，我们都需要一个个查。

First of all, the translation we usually do [at school] is more related to literature or something like that, but the present task is related to medicine, which falls out of our knowledge scope. Speaking of those terms we have to check them one by one.

To sum up, the volunteers encountered a range of challenges rising from the urgency of the task and the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in which they found themselves, their limited proficiency in the target language as well as their lack of relevant professional knowledge.

4 Strategies to facilitate crisis translation

In order to overcome these challenges, the volunteers worked in close collaboration and employed translingual and network strategies to facilitate the crisis translation asked of them.

To address terminology challenges, the volunteers most frequently drew on English as a link language. Reliance on such relay translation was reported for Arabic, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. For example, P5, the Arabic teacher, mentioned her strategy as follows:

我记得当时我希望把英文版本的给我，因为主要是一些专业术语，我如果有一个英文版本，那么我可以到谷歌上去确认一下就比较好翻。我们小语种，反正至少我是一直有这个习惯的，尤其是一些尤其是一些科技类的文档，我都会去借鉴英文，

I remembered that I hoped to get the English version. Mainly for some terms. For terms, if I have an English version, I could Google it for confirmation, which would make my translation easier. For us who work with small languages, at least for me, I'm used to referring to English first especially when I'm translating science and technology documents.

The reliance on English reveals an implicit ideology of regarding English as the authoritative source of information, thus reinforcing the Anglophone-centeredness in information flow and knowledge building (Lillis and Curry 2010; Zheng and Guo 2019).

To overcome their lack of professional knowledge, the volunteers assembled as work units according to the various target languages and formed WeChat groups where they discussed how to translate specific language forms, and shared online resources that they found elsewhere (see also Zhang and Wu, this issue). A specific strategy was to draw on shared norms. For instance, the team leaders (P1 and P2) collected all the terminologies related to the COVID-19 from materials released from the official website of the Exit-Entry Administration Bureau of Shanghai Public Security Department, organized them into multilingual glossaries, and made it into sharable documents that were distributed to all the Wechat groups. Group members also added new terms to the sharable documents when necessary. This was effective, as P4 attested that “we all referred to the table in translating the

terminologies. It made it less difficult.” Such practice greatly mitigated the difficulties brought by their non-professional status and the urgency of the task.

Furthermore, in order to overcome the lack of language competence and cultural appropriateness, the volunteer translators enlisted help from competent target language speakers to review their translation. For example, P4 asked her Korean friend to check the tone of her translated work and to help refine her intonation in recording the audio clips to better accommodate the Korean speakers; P6 and P7 asked their foreign teachers, who were still in Russia and Spain at the time, to improve the naturalness of the translated texts. It is worth mentioning that the Spanish team consisting of second-year students who were in Shanghai as well as third-year students who were studying abroad in Madrid during the translation effort. The following excerpt demonstrates their collaboration:

有些词可能会有很多意思。一方面是我们这些在国内的同学，我自己会去网上查一些他们当地的报道，也会去搜集一些比较权威的翻译文件。三年级的同学在海外，他们生活经验里面也会有遇到过这些词语，也能稍微区分哪一个词比较地道。

Some words may have multiple meanings. On the one hand, those who are in China would check the Spanish news reports, and search for some authoritative translation work, to check their word choice. The third-year students who are in Spain may encounter these words in their daily life, so they could also help decide which word is more commonly used.

In sum, during this crisis translation effort, the student volunteers engaged in collaborative social practice during which different people assumed different roles in shaping the evolving text in different stages. This collaboration extended to multiple spaces, from local to global and from physical to virtual.

Overall, the product of this translation effort was helpful to Chinese health workers who had to engage in health communication with foreign residents, as attested to by P9, the local community worker:

《预诊预判交流多语口袋书》和《防控告知书》英日韩文字版和音频版真的很有用。

《口袋书》在与外国居民的面对面交流中发挥了重要作用，我们通过手指相应的问题，借助语音翻译器即时交流。《防控告知书》的文字版在小区张贴，音频版在小区播放，也为外国居民进行了防控知识普及和宣传。

The pocketbook and the *Notification for Foreign Visitors*, both the written form and audio clips, are really useful. We relied on the pocketbook when we communicated with foreign residents face to face. We pointed at the specific question on the pocketbook, and used audio translation software to assist our communication. The *Notification* was posted at the entrance of the community, and the audio clips were broadcasted daily in the neighborhood. It greatly helped publicize the disease control measures and relevant information.

5 Conclusion and implications

This paper has examined the multilingual translation efforts of a group of university volunteer translators during the COVID-19 outbreak in Shanghai. The findings have revealed that the volunteers were confronted with a range of challenges that ultimately demonstrate that Shanghai was not sufficiently prepared for emergency communication in languages other than Chinese and English at the start of the crisis. Even so, they dexterously shuttled between different languages and mobilized various social network resources to complete the translation tasks to the best of their ability and the satisfaction of local health authorities.

The translation experiences of foreign language students reported here highlight the high level of national emergency language competence required in an emergency like the COVID-19 crisis in a multilingual and global city such as Shanghai (see also Li, Rao, Zhang, and Li, this issue). As shown in the present case, multilingual crisis translation is highly situated and fluid, characterized by a tension between the high demands of professional multilingual translators and limited resources. Although there are abundant official materials distributed through the official channel (such as the documents released by the Shanghai Public Security Department), these materials may not suit the specific needs of grassroots users. In this light, top-down planning should be complemented by timely and flexible volunteer work from bottom up. The present study suggests that foreign language major students in local universities may well serve as readily available multilingual resources, and when an emergency arises, they can be mobilized in prompt response to the grassroots multilingual needs of the local community.

However, there are still some unresolved issues related to multilingual crisis communication and global city management. A metropolitan city such as Shanghai must be better prepared to address multilingual needs to cope with major epidemics and other public health emergencies. Government and institution-level initiatives to set up language-related emergency response mechanisms are needed to ensure local public health in close partnership with the existing multilingual repertoires.

First, in view of the lack of multilingual abilities of the general public, more efforts need to be spent on diversifying Chinese people's foreign language abilities in the long run (Gao and Zheng 2019; see also Li, Xie, Ai, and Li, this issue). Second, it is advisable for the educational sector to enforce elements of disaster prevention or risk reduction in their curricula. Third, long-term and stable student volunteer networks should be built as part of municipal public health management planning. The network of "Disaster Language Volunteers" created by the Tokyo

Metropolitan Government can be referred to as an exemplar case (Cadwell 2020). In an initial attempt, the “Epidemic Language Service Corps” was established by a group of Chinese scholars during the fight against the COVID-19 (Li et al. 2020; see also Li, Rao, Zhang, and Li, this issue). More work awaits to be done to form an effective mechanism that mobilizes foreign language university students for effective emergency language service in global multilingual cities.

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