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Conceptualizing national emergency language competence

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Abstract: National emergency language competence (NELC) can be understood as the capacity to use language to cope with domestic and international public emergencies. NELC constitutes the foundation of and guidance for the provision of emergency language services. Based on a review of emergency language services and language competence development, this paper proposes a theoretical model for constructing NELC along the following four dimensions: emergency stage, language tasks, non-linguistic resources, and types of emergency languages. The paper concludes with suggestions on the planning and development of NELC.

Keywords: national emergency language competence, language services, multilingualism in China

1 Introduction

National language competence is “the language competence of a state to deal with various domestic and foreign affairs” (Li 2011). In coping with a public emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic or crises resulting from natural disasters, war, or terrorism, the capacity to mobilize “emergency languages” constitutes a key aspect of constructing national language competence. It is of vital importance to accumulate sufficient resources for emergency language

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competence at the state level given that the government is the main body tasked with managing national emergencies. For example, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, China mobilized a range of national resources to assist Hubei Province, the initial epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak. However, the trans-provincial rescue mission encountered many language and communication barriers. To address those, China's Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission, assembled more than 40 experts from universities and enterprises to form “战疫语言服务团 [Language services group for epidemic prevention and control].” The Group developed a series of language service materials, such as the *Handbook of Hubei Dialects for Medical Assistance Teams*, *Plain Chinese for Epidemic Prevention and Control*, and *Guide to the Prevention and Control of the COVID-19 Epidemic in Foreign Languages* (see Li 2020, for details). These linguists made a positive contribution to facilitating doctor-patient clinical communication in Hubei dialects as well as international medical services in multiple languages.

However, China's national emergency language competence (NELC) is still at a nascent stage. Emergency language services such as those China mobilized during its COVID-19 outbreak are not yet “conscious actions,” because language services for emergency response have not been included in any emergency plan or law. In recent years, China has strengthened its legal and technical infrastructure in relation to the prevention and control of public emergencies. However, there is a lack of emergency language service awareness in China's emergency preparation and response. This paper aims to help overcome this lack by developing a theoretical framework for conceptualizing NELC, with a particular focus on China.

2 Strategies of constructing NELC

NELC is an integral part of national governance, as the purposes of constructing NELC are to improve the level of language services for public emergencies, meet the language needs of emergency response efforts, and allow for the full development of language services in the response and recovery stages of public emergencies. In the following four sections we will outline how strategies of NELC construction can be framed along the four dimensions of emergency stage, language tasks, non-linguistic resources, and types of emergency languages.

2.1 Stages of public emergencies

A public emergency can be divided into three stages, namely before, during, and after the emergency. Different strategies for emergency language services are required at each stage. The pre-emergency strategy is to make emergency language services plans for human resources, data and technology reserves. Linguistic disaster preparedness is the basis and guarantee of language services during the emergency response. The during-emergency strategy is to meet language needs, eliminate language barriers, and allow sufficient time and space for the deployment of language resources in emergency actions and post-disaster reconstruction. Finally, the post-emergency strategy is to reflect on the experiences gained in the process of emergency response in a timely manner, and to adopt the lessons learned into preparation for future emergencies. This includes refining laws and plans pertinent to emergency language services and continuously improving human resources, data and technology reserves.

2.2 The tasks of emergency language services

Emergency language services predominantly involve three tasks: the provision of information, comfort, and monitoring, each of which requires a different strategy.

With regard to the first task, language services are central to ensure the transmission, comprehension and feedback of information without a language barrier. “Barrier-free” language communication is the most important task in emergency language services, and involves a range of aspects, such as information design, information release, and multilingual service provision. Moreover, often under stress the language abilities of individuals will decline (Leelawat et al. 2017; Uekusa 2019). Therefore, plain language services are of the utmost importance to ensure the efficient dissemination of emergency information. In China, the “Plain Chinese” program focuses on identifying a range of words and expressions that are accessible to people with low levels of literacy in Chinese. It is vital to build a highly accessible language resource library and develop a simplified language platform and system for human-machine interaction.

With regard to the second task, providing comfort, language is essential to provide emotional comfort and psychological support services to disaster-affected populations, emergency response workers, and the wider public. Disasters have secondary effects on the mental health of directly affected populations as well the wider public. Language plays a vital role in comforting, inspiring and guiding people, and containing the spread of panic.

Finally, the task of linguistic monitoring involves keeping abreast of social discourses and managing them to maximize beneficial discourses directed at humanitarian support and the common good, while minimizing harmful stigmatizing, discriminatory or insulting discourses.

2.3 Non-linguistic resources

Emergency language competence is closely associated with five types of non-linguistic resources: management capacity (1), mobilization capacity (2), intellectual resources (3), data resources (4), and technological resources (5). These five types of resources, which are related to yet another set of strategies, will be outlined in this section.

Management or governance capacity (1) involves the existence of a master plan for distributing various resources and adopting corresponding strategies. It aims to promote the formulation and implementation of relevant laws, regulations, norms, and standards to ensure the implementation of emergency language services.

Mobilization capacity (2) requires the development of a reserve of intellectual, data and technical resources, as well as the organization and operation of emergency language services groups. It also requires carrying out emergency language services as a group by mobilizing various social resources. The indexes for mobilization capacity can be manifested by the organization, operation and maintenance of emergency language services groups.

Intellectual capacity (3) means preparing the intellectual resources for various emergency language service plans and scientifically designed plans for disaster preparedness which can be implemented in a timely and effective manner. Indicators of achieving intellectual capacity are emergency language services plans, implementation plans, details of each task, and the academic support behind them.

Data collection capacity (4) means that, as part of NELC, we need in-depth research into the languages and varieties used nationally and, given the increasingly global nature of disasters, internationally. This involves building general, domain, terminology, and parallel corpora of various languages, as well as a relevant cultural knowledge base.

Finally, technological capacity (5) needs to be planned so as to build language intelligence, technologies for information sharing, technical equipment, infrastructure, and corresponding evaluation standards to meet the requirements of various emergency services. Technological capacity can be further broken down into technological reserve and application capacity, that is, the ability to develop

and leverage software platforms, network services, hardware facilities and equipment required for each emergency language service task.

2.4 Types of emergency languages

Emergency language competence works through languages, and each type of language requires a different strategy. In China, for example, the types of language involved in an emergency are the standard national language (Putonghua), Chinese varieties, minority languages, major foreign languages, cross-border languages, and sign language. First, the standard national language – Putonghua in our case – is central to emergency language service provision. Second, major non-standard varieties – Chinese dialects and overseas Chinese languages in our case – need to be included in emergency language services. Third, emergency language services need to be available in the languages and dialects of all national minorities. Fourth, emergency language services need to be accessible in the world's major languages, which include the official working languages of the United Nations and important regional languages such as German, Hindi-Urdu, Japanese, Malay-Indonesian, Portuguese, and Swahili. Fifth, official languages of neighboring countries need to be used in emergency language services. In addition, where those neighboring countries have large populations and high strategic importance, emergency language services also need to be available in their major non-official languages. Sixth, a nation's standard sign language and Braille shall be included in emergency language services, and, where major varieties of these exist, domestic varieties of sign languages and Braille should also be considered.

3 Constructing national emergency language competence

The four dimensions of NELC identified above and their attendant strategies support and coordinate with each other, constituting the overall structure of NELC (see Figure 1).

The theoretical framework and strategies of NELC determine its specific content. The different constituent capacities of NELC (namely, management capacity, mobilization capacity, intellectual capacity, data collection capacity, and technological capacity) are the axis of the model with different characteristics at different implementation stages (namely, before, during, and after an emergency). Moreover, different implementation tasks determine the task types of emergency

Figure 1: The overall structure of national emergency language competence.

language services (namely, the provision of information, comforting, and monitoring). The dimension of language types (namely, standard national language, non-standard varieties, minority languages, major international languages, cross-border languages, sign languages, and Braille) enables these task types to be transformed into specific emergency language services. This process enables the transformation from “Capacities” to “Concrete tasks”, as shown in Figure 2.

The legal basis of emergency language service is the cornerstone to ensure the operation of the whole system. Emergency language service plan which is composed of contingency plans, implementation plans and details supports the

Figure 2: The process of implementing national emergency language competence.

organization of emergency language service groups and the execution of various tasks. Emergency language service groups are the agent of emergency language competence. They are responsible for implementing emergency language service plans and fulfilling different types of tasks in various domains. Emergency language service groups carry out various tasks by leveraging tools and resources, namely, language technologies, software and hardware platforms, various corpora, and language knowledge bases.

4 Conclusion

NELC is a nation's linguistic competence in dealing with disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall aim of constructing and improving NELC is to meet the language needs of emergency response efforts and allocate sufficient time and space to the role of language in the process of emergency preparation, response, and recovery. Given that constructing NELC is a daunting task, scholars need to carefully examine existing language service practices. The language lessons gained from China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly be useful to the construction of NELC in China and beyond.

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