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AN APPROACH TO MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract: The COVID 19 pandemic and successive crises are bringing about changes with terrible consequences at all levels. They are constantly highlighting the fragility and vulnerability of people and countries and the recognition that we are not self-sufficient but interdependent. In this global context of pandemic and globalisation, humanitarian aid is all the more necessary, and the use of professionals to achieve effective communication and understanding in multilingual contexts are key elements. The main objective of this article is twofold: Firstly, to call the attention to issues that affect communication in multilingual humanitarian settings, and, secondly, to discuss some of the many problems and different solutions in practice when dealing with translation and interpreting in such complex and diverse scenarios.

Keywords: Humanitarian crisis; Multilingual communication; Public Service Interpreting and Translation; PSIT; Translation; Interpreting.

INTRODUCTION: GLOBALISATION AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES

The COVID-19 pandemic caused changes with terrible consequences at all levels - health, social, economic, educational, environmental. Alleviating this burden requires a common action as the pandemic has once again highlighted the fragility and vulnerability of people and countries and the understanding that humans are not self-sufficient but interdependent.

The COVID 19 pandemic and successive crises (Afghan crisis, Ukraine war, Turkey earthquake) have confirmed that we live in a globalised but asymmetrical world, as globalisation favours people and countries

unequally. Globalisation also favours migration and although it is as old as humanity, since the end of the 20th century and in this 21st century it has taken on quantitatively gigantic proportions on a global scale and have become a challenge of the first magnitude to which no existing body has provided a solution or response in accordance with the dignity that human beings deserve. Two examples to illustrate the situation can be the crisis in the Canary Islands in the spring of 2021¹ (*El País*, 20/11/2021), or the crisis with Morocco in May 2021, where hundreds of unaccompanied Moroccan minors await their fate in Ceuta² (*Público* 1/6 2021).

In this global context of pandemics and globalisation, humanitarian aid becomes even more necessary. The lack of communication and understanding due to linguistic and/or cultural issues aggravates the situation when the use of lingua(s) franca or most widely used languages is not possible and lesser-used languages or languages of lesser diffusion (LLD) are unfortunately the languages that humanitarian aid workers most frequently encounter.

At the institutional level, however, the language issue is often not a priority or is barely mentioned. It is the endless paradox of multilingual communication: on the one hand, professional translators and interpreters (Tr&In) are a fundamental link to re-establish this communication when there are linguistic or cultural barriers; on the other hand, they are not recognised as professionals. As a consequence, there are many people who liaise without being professionals - some with experience and others as mere bilinguals or those who know the languages at a level that allows some form of communication. The diversity of contexts and circumstances in which T&I is needed also influences its

1. <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-11-15/el-descontrol-de-la-crisis-migratoria-en-canarias-pone-en-alerta-al-gobierno.html>.

2. <https://www.publico.es/internacional/crisis-marruecos-marruecos-readmitira-menores-no-acompanados-union-europea.html> (1/6/2021)

lack of recognition as a profession, which undoubtedly influences other aspects such as low pay, long working hours or lack of (supply of) training (Ortega Herraiz & Blasco 2018)

ISSUES OF MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Some of the issues that characterized (or should characterize) multilingual communication in crisis situations, - and T&I as ways of communication,- could be summarized in the following statements: 1. High level of interdependence between the different active agents . 2. Agreement on joint codes of action and guides of good practice. Attention should be paid to these ideas in the following pages.

HIGH LEVEL OF INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT ACTIVE AGENTS

Interdependence - not interdisciplinarity as used in academic forums – here refers to the collaboration between teams and professionals from different fields who must necessarily work together in the resolution of a conflict or crisis situation. (Monzó-Nebot & Wallace (2020). Certainly, the entities that best understand their work are solidarity are organisations such as NGOs with a universal commitment and, on occasions, with global influence beyond states, such as, for example, the Red Cross, Caritas, Amnesty International, OXFAM International, Manos Unidas, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), or *Translators Without Borders* (TWB) to name but a few. They often have agencies in different parts of the world, offer their need where needed and have earned a respect that transcends the borders of countries, and work globally with states and companies, but maintaining their independence, and reaching credibility. (Valero-Garcés & Kemp 2023).

Federici (2019), in his lecture at the conference VIII International Conference on PSIT, held at the University of Alcalá with the main topic of exploring the use of technology in crisis situations, makes clear the complexity of humanitarian aid and the role of language barriers: “Language barriers in communication during crisis scenarios emerge in extremely complex operational scenarios: many problems and many solutions”, and adds: “Linguistic and cultural mediation should not an ad-hoc patch-up but part of concerted and holistic solutions”.

Policastro (2020) points in the same direction: “ (...) the presence of interpreters at NGOs is a fact (...)” and continues: “ (...) NGO has become the primary instrument for foreigners, asylum seekers and refugees, and whose activity depends, to a great extent, on the PSI interpreters’ role”.

Sutherlin, (2019), who holds a degree in Political Science and a PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies, and has participated in international actions in North Africa, and whose practical experience in designing intercultural conflict resolution programmes, gaining the recognition for innovation from the UN, comments in the interview conducted in 2019 at the University of Alcalá: “(...) Interpreting is vital to make aid efficient, and it connects the victims and aid workers at a human level so that we feel we are working together to help one another”. She adds: “After the recent hurricane that struck Puerto Rico, research showed that the lack of communication due to loss of power, phone and internet made families distressed as much as the lack of basic resources”.

Emerging initiatives by NGOs, such as *Médecins du Monde* (Pirola 2019); TWB (Sotile 2019), or by teams of professionals in emergency situations (Sutherlin 2019, Cortés 2019), are becoming more and more frequent. Results indicate that collaboration between

different professionals is the key to their effectiveness and part of their international recognition beyond states (Valero- Garcés 2023).

However, there is still a long way to go. Research in PSIT reflects the lack of recognition of Tr&In in healthcare settings, distrust of judges towards the interpreter, as well as the lack of sensitivity towards collaboration between professions and the defence of their own interests (Valero-Garcés & Lázaro 2016; Ortega Herraiz & Blasco Mayor 2018).

Almost two decades ago, Corsellis (2002) already wrote that in order to reduce the gap between the administration and users, it was necessary to establish a smoothly functioning system. Corsellis visualised it as a chain shaped by the three fundamental actors: public services providers + intermediaries who make communication possible + users who do not master the language in which the services are provided. The success of the interaction would depend on the collaboration of the three actors.

Prioritizing the benefit of the users is fundamental in humanitarian aid. Some examples can be found in the papers presented at the *Non Professional Interpreting and Translation* (NPIT) conference series (Antonini et al 2017, Martínez-Gómez 2015). The work of these interpreters challenges PSIT and Humanitarian T&I models that promote detachment and invisibility to the loss of professional autonomy in order to achieve higher degrees of professionalism and institutional trust. The assumptions underlying the belief that objectives can only be achieved through neutrality and impartiality are also challenged.

The justification of the principle of maximising profit at all costs, without opting for mutual benefit, is perhaps one of the execrations of globalisation – asymmetrical as we said - that reaches all levels, whether

business, institutional or social. The system of subcontracting translation and interpreting services by the government, or the complaints that we frequently see in the press about the performance of some “interpreters” are some examples.

International aid workers (ICW) show a more socially progressive stance in which interpreters are seen as socially engaged citizens by claiming a more interactive role, and in which empathy and compassion become an integral part of the role they are called upon to play (Valero-Garcés & Kemp 2023).

There is no doubt that the extraordinary technological advances of the last few decades with machine translation (MT) or artificial intelligence (AI) have meant tremendous progress for intralinguistic communication, especially in majority languages or in specialised fields.

Within humanitarian aid, there are inclusive initiatives in society, such as the NGO Global-TWB and its collaboration with technology companies for the development of initiatives aimed at the most vulnerable (Valero-Garcés & Kemp 2023). An example is the multilingual *Chatbox*, software developed in three languages spoken in Nigeria (English, and two LMDs, Hausa and Kanuri) to improve citizens’ understanding of COVID-19, but also to help humanitarian responders understand what information people need and want and in what language. The work of Verasat, a company specialising in mobile satellite communications is equally illustrative (Cortes 2019).

However, research shows that languages and translation generally have a low profile across the humanitarian (and development) sector (Tesseur 2018; O’Brien and Federici 2019, 2022). And, as pointed out in other forums (Balogh et al. 2014, Valero Garcés 2018, 2020), this is not always the case

for languages of lesser diffusion (LMD) for which many mobile tools or applications used on a daily basis are practically non-existent. On the other hand, the move towards a single digital market, in which English is the lingua franca, excludes many people and makes PSIT and humanitarian T&I even more necessary.

AGREEMENT ON JOINT CODES OF ACTION AND GUIDES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Some of the questions that arise when thinking about active agents are, for example: Who are the interlocutors that take decisions about how to manage communication? Who intervenes in decisions about how budgets and resources are made available to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers? Who develops codes and guidelines for good practice? Is an inter-professional team involved? Are they inclusive? Do they involve everyone as active agents?

FOUR ACTORS WITH DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES:

- Some international NGOs (e.g. Red Cross) have earned respect that transcends the borders of countries and maintains their independence, achieving credibility.
- International organisations such as the UN and the 2030 Agenda try to maintain their recognition with global commitments that appeal to a diversity of countries, but they are constrained by their own laws and the effectiveness of their actions can be relative.
- Multinationals and financial organisations, whose global influence is undeniable, have commitments that are often less universal because they tend to protect and respect the good of “their” community. They, thus, favour only one

part of society to the exclusion of another part, which is often the most vulnerable.

- National and local administration are usually constrained (or excuse) by financial cuts in T&I services and tend to outsource these services to external agencies, prioritising the economic benefit or welfare of a ‘majority’ and excluding the most vulnerable while solidarity is claimed (Foulquie et al 2018:9).

In a society in which the media broadcast daily images of people in refugee camps, boats with migrants rescued in the last resort, or children without their families, international aid workers often have to act as interpreters and translators or use “bilingual” migrants to communicate. These practices are not questioned in crises situations, and are becoming legitimised in our consciences. Research also shows children who accompany their mothers to the doctor, or friends or people with no command of languages or the subject matter who assist in court cases (Gavioli & Wadensjo 2023).

A look at the committees that draw up the ethical codes of Tr&In associations does not leave a good taste in our mouths either. Members of these committee are usually professional interpreters already working for institutions or freelance interpreters or interpreter trainers. An example is the codes of ethics of two associations that have served as a starting point for many others, IMIA (International Medical Interpreters Association) and AUSIT (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators), indicate that their codes or standards of good practice have been developed by members of the association or working groups that include representatives of sign language and Tr &In companies or interpreters hired by institutions or freelancers. However, there is hardly any trace of other professions.

There are also examples where there is greater cooperation. This is the case of the *Libro Blanco de la Traducción e Interpretación Institucional* (RITAP 2011), a joint work - as announced in the foreword - of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MAEC), the European Commission, the Directorate-General for Translation and Representation of the European Commission in Spain, the Network of Interpreters and Translators for the Public Administration (RITAP) and the Professional Association of Court and Sworn Translators and Interpreters (APTIJ), which devotes a chapter to the code of ethics and good practices.

There is no universal code, but there is neither agreement on the fundamental ethical principles to be included and adhered to. Hale (2007) compared 16 ethical codes related to Tr&In and found that most include the principles of fidelity, impartiality and confidentiality, but with variations: Fidelity is included in 12 of the 16 codes analysed, impartiality in 11 of the 16 codes) and confidentiality in 13 of the 116 codes). So, not all of them include the principles considered as fundamental.

A more detailed review and analysis of these fundamental principles may lead us to the conclusion that an attempt is made to protect the profession or performance of Tr&In, excluding those who do not have a voice or do not participate, that is, the users, by not contemplating conflict situations in which it may be very difficult to maintain the principle of fidelity and neutrality, for example, when interpreting during the rescue of migrants or responding to a distress call. Emotion and empathy are also left out. The question then arises: Do these codes correspond to the reality of T &I in humanitarian contexts?

The complexity of contexts and situations is so diverse that it seems impossible that adhere to a single code. The objective is

communication, as defined by Sotile from TWB (Sotile 2019), for whom the fundamental issue is to eliminate the language gap that hinders humanitarian efforts and access to information. Sotile also draws attention to the current dissociation between practices and the goals to be achieved. Farias (2021), an international aid worker, points out that what matters is to save lives, to help. She denounces the lack of sensitivity and action on the part of society, which leaves people to die at sea or in refugee camps with the excuse that nothing can be done, when the smallest detail can help.

There are examples of good practice beyond the codes or recommendations already mentioned (Aguilar Solano 2015, Antonini et al 2017). These are examples where efforts are made to maximise the benefit of all parties, even at the cost of departing from the prescriptive or normative principles that the codes seem to impose. The work of IAW who must assume the role of interpreters challenges PSIT and T&I humanitarian models that promote detachment and invisibility to the detriment of professional autonomy in order to achieve greater degrees of professionalism and institutional trust. Their actions also challenge the assumptions underlying the belief that objectives can only be achieved through neutrality and impartiality. On the contrary, these teams of international aid workers call for a more interactive role, in which empathy and compassion become an integral part of the role they must play, and which also includes T&I (O'Brian 2019).

NGOs often recognise the fundamental role of T&I in resolving linguistic and cultural barriers along with the reciprocal recognition of all professionals involved (architects, doctors, social workers, teachers, interpreters, engineers) in any refugee camp. Spanish NGOs such as *Salud entre Culturas*, *ACCEM*, or *Red Acoge* developed materials in LLD to help during the pandemic (Álvaro Aranda

2020). This way of acting is close to the model of cosmopolitan ethics as explained, among others, by Cortina (2021). Cortina puts the emphasis on two key principles that should be applied to any profession, but are sometimes forgotten in some of the practices mentioned above. The two principles are: 1. recognition of dignity of all human beings equally; 2. recognition of vulnerability of human beings.

Following Cortina, recognising the dignity of all human beings equally should serve to empower all migrants and asylum seekers who are forced to migrate and to enable them to fulfill their life plans. As for the principle of vulnerability, - which is not compassion - a very misunderstood feeling, according to Cortina - should be understood as the capacity to sympathise with joy and sadness alike. This implies co-responsibility in solidarity to help maintain (or create) a sustainable society and with the collaboration of all the agents involved.

At present, however, reason prevails in the codes of ethics and good practice guidelines in use. There are few or no elements that contribute to the management of emotion.

Research showing the role of emotions in Tr&In performance are growing in numbers. Studies by Brauer (2018), Korpala and Jasielska (2019), Krystallidou et al (2020), Merlini & Gatti (2015), Merlini (2019), Medina Escajadillo (2019), Roko (2021), Valero-Garcés (2021) show how the inclusion of emotions is required in practice. Such a conclusion contradicts “good practice” according to the general principles guiding the recommended codes. It would therefore be necessary to change the attitude towards different ethical models that are descriptive rather than restrictive in order to seek the benefit of all active agents.

Including empathy and emotion is an added value, not a contradiction. This trend is gaining ground and points to the need to re-

examine theories of Tr&In and the guidelines set out in codes and guides to good practice. Examining and taking into account the perceptions of service providers, interpreters and users and aligning their ethical codes towards more universal principles would move us towards the cosmopolitan ethics advocated by philosophers and repeated by politicians and economists: sustainability, solidarity, inclusion to meet the UN 2030 Agenda while continuing to reduce the limitations of PSIT and T&I in humanitarian contexts.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

Humanitarian crisis are constantly highlighting the fragility and vulnerability of people and countries and the recognition that we are not self-sufficient but interdependent and effective communication and understanding in multilingual contexts are key elements to alleviate difficult situations. This article proposes a reflection of the role of translation and interpreting in crisis contexts by calling the attention to some of the challenges and strategies used to overcome linguistic barriers in such complex and diverse scenarios.

The first conclusion to be drawn from the above is that translation and interpreting in humanitarian contexts require a commitment beyond the words and the simple non-committal talk that an influential sector (politicians, multinational companies, international organisations) of our society likes to use.

There is a profusion of practices that defend the legitimacy of public debate by using terms with ambiguous or empty meanings, or discussions without compromise, or bilateral negotiations without a clear end. The future should involve a code of ethics in which all parties (ICW, police, doctors, lawyers, translators and interpreters, and receivers of humanitarian help) would work together.

Each of these professions has its own codes, the question is how to coordinate them or how to draw from them a cosmopolitan code, activating a democratic citizenship in which reason and emotions are taken into account. We live in mixed, hybrid cultures that require other strategies.

There are three points, following Federici (2019), that should be highlighted in conclusion:

- 1. The crisis scenarios or those requiring help are very complex and diverse and the same applies to the type of linguistic barriers to be overcome - there are many problems and many solutions to be found.
- 2. Access to information is paramount and the means and strategies to deliver it are equally complex and diverse, and technologies can help.
- 3. Bridging language barriers requires good communication involving

professionals (linguistic and cultural mediators, translators and interpreters). Communication should not be an *ad hoc* stop-gap, but part of joint and holistic solutions.

As a final reflection the words of a specialist in this field:

‘Professional translators are understandably worried about the use of untrained translators in any setting and their use in disaster settings is no exception. ‘The status of the profession is already under question and deployment of untrained volunteers does not help. An additional issue arises due to the special nature of disasters: it is sometimes expected that professional translators and interpreters should give freely of their time and expertise if a disaster strikes. Yet, translating is how they make a living. Is it right for translators and interpreters to feel pressure to work for free, even if the situation is one of crisis, and even if they, themselves, might be personally affected by the crisis?’ (O’Brien 2019)

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