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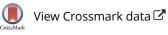
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REVIEW ARTICLE

From translation in multilingual emergencies and conflicts to crisis translation

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It is an unfortunate truth that we do not have many effective translation tools and strategies for responding to multilingual and multicultural crises, whether human-induced or natural. Existing services are inefficient and inadequate for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in crises. There is no robust and coherent communication strategy for CALD communities in crises, demonstrating that there is ample room for improvement (Federici, 2016). The annual themes of International Translation Day can exemplify this, which have included 'A world without barriers: the role of language professionals in building culture, understanding and lasting peace' in 2022, 'United in translation' in 2021, 'Finding the words for a world in crisis' in 2020, and 'Language rights: essential to all human rights' in 2014.

Every choice one makes during crises without being fully informed runs the risk of escalating harm. Depriving people of the right to access information in their first

language during a crisis violates their (linguistic) human rights. Intersecting with other risks, the domino effect of damage is evident. However, translation could act as a buffer to alleviate this issue.

The complexity of multilingual and multicultural communication in crises is a subject which has lacked concrete research. There is a disjuncture between research and practice in crisis communication in multilingual emergencies. It is crucial to develop theoretical orientations and analytical frameworks that are systematic, robust and effective to enable researchers and practitioners to become fully aware of language mediation in disaster relief and of translation as a tool for risk reduction, crisis management, and resilience building.

In this review essay, I describe how researchers in Translation Studies (TS) have addressed the piecemeal research on linguistic translation and mediation in multilingual crises by reviewing four books edited by Federico Federici: *Language as a Social Determinant of Health* (2022), *Mediating Emergencies and Conflicts* (2016), *Translation in Cascading Crises* (with Sharon O'Brien, 2019), and *Intercultural Crisis Communication* (with Christophe Declercq, 2021). Each book shows how translation used in crisis situations can not only overcome linguistic barriers, but also aid communication, enhance resilience, reduce risks, and uphold human rights. Examining these books together reveals that connections are starting to emerge between the fields of TS and crisis communication, disaster management, and risk reduction and that serious perennial blind spots in these fields are beginning to be addressed. This is the need to integrate translation services and awareness in crisis communication throughout the disaster cycle, including response, recovery, mitigation, and preparation. Thanks to the porous and permeable feature of TS, the birth of Crisis Translation (CT), demonstrated in part by these books, brings new energy to TS.

From the seeds of *Mediating Emergencies and Conflicts* and *Translation in Cascading Crises* grew the trees of the more recent two books, *Intercultural Crisis Communication* and *Language as a Social Determinant of Health*. Together they demonstrate how the notion of CT has grown, paving the way for other scholars (such as Blumczynski & Wilson, 2022; Lee & Wang, 2022; Liu & Cheung, 2022; O'Brien & Federici, 2022) concerned with multilingual communication barriers in crises.

This review essay has five sections. Section 1 describes how translation and language can provide solutions for everyone, especially vulnerable and underprivileged populations. Section 2 introduces and reviews the label 'Crisis Translation', showing how CT has matured, as manifested in these four books, starting with the initial interest in 2016 and moving toward renewed calls in 2022. Section 3 and Section 4 focus on two vital areas of research for multilingual crises: health and migration. Section 5 concludes this review essay and points out future research direction. In short, the power of translation in crisis is greatly constrained by failing to integrate crisis communication and disaster management. CT, although still under construction, offers opportunities for expansion, suggests potential new lines of research into relevant disciplines, and aids emergency relief.

1. Preparing for unpredictable multilingual crises: the role of translation

These books bring into sharp focus the essential but often neglected role of translation in multilingual crises. All assume that translation is not an end point in itself but has a distinct purpose in supporting risk reduction in multilingual crises.

Based on the insights from these books, I borrow an analogy from Grin (2017) to argue that the role of translation in risk avoidance, risk reduction, communication aid, human rights, care and support is like the image of Cinderella confined to humble domestic chores while her elder sisters (such as textual and linguistical equivalence paradigm, which fixates on the dissemination of information without considering multicultural contextual adjustments and target users' information, abilities and literacy needs) enjoy all the attention. However, these books stand out from the crowd and consider translation as an indispensable mediator with specific purposes in multilingual crises.

Crises are multifaceted and affect a heterogeneous group of people; thus, translation of various forms needs to be diversified accordingly. The first role of translation in crises is to act as a catalyst for resisting disproportionate information distribution and thus to redress inequalities in access to life-saving information. As such, translation operates within a field characterized by unequal distributions of power involving multiple levels of negotiation between dominant languages and subaltern languages. But it can also be a tool for empowerment, favoring those who have been linguistically marginalized. Full linguistic representation and preparedness during crisis communication should be advocated. In crises, translation is needed to improve situational awareness by enabling all voices to be heard and letting people in vulnerable situations access information in their mother tongue or comprehensible representations so that they are fully aware of the risks and can take recommended and prompt actions. Therefore, translation plays an important role in mitigating linguistic, racial, and health inequities and mediating in emergencies.

The second role of translation in crises is to safeguard the rights of CALD communities in crises. If information is not fully available in multiple languages and formats in increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies, the linguistic and informational rights of those speaking minority languages will be violated. Cross-cultural communication barriers during crises can lead to miscoordination and miscommunication and further result in risk sharing and transfer. For this reason, the third role of translation in crises is to aid communication in humanitarian response and emergency recovery, as illustrated by the many cases of catastrophic consequences due to a lack of appropriate linguistic mediation and intercultural communication. Translation also plays a fourth role as a tool for disaster management and risk mitigation or as part of disaster relief and prevention measures. If translation is used wisely, it can increase resilience and lead to greater inclusion, an improved response and better protection.

This snapshot of the roles of translation in crises shows that the complex cultural and linguistic needs in crisis situations cannot be resolved by a static monolingual mindset or a one-size-fits-all linguistic approach. The multilingual need in crisis calls for a more systematic, research-informed framework to address the translation issues in a more agile way. As a result of the EU-funded International Network on Crisis Translation, CT has become one such approach.

The development and use of CT is discussed in the next section.

2. From the outside looking in: crisis translation as a mindset and a practice

The development of the new academic field of CT, launched in 2016 and led by O'Brien and Federici, among others, has revealed new multilingual needs that scholars must

address. Although some advances have been made in areas pertinent to translation in conflict-specific situations, TS scholars still need a more robust method of collaborating with other disciplines to deal with the unpredictable multilingual crises to come. This section explains the concept of CT, delineates its development from 2016 to 2022, and specifies its core principles.

Previous global and regional crises have served as catalysts for the recognition of the significance of multilingual communication; thus, the birth of CT is no coincidence. The much-needed field of CT explicitly acknowledges the roles of translation and the full potential of translators in crises, creating a home for similar research. It is situated at the crossroads of three disciplines: disaster risk reduction, translation and interpreting studies, and risk and crisis communication (*Translation in Cascading Crises*, p. 8-9). As its name implies, Crisis Translation is anchored in the discipline of TS but actively invites interdisciplinary input from the fields of crisis and risk, thereby offering new perspectives to those engaged in crisis communication and management. Relevant people include linguistic intermediaries, such as professional translators and intercultural coordinators, and non-linguistic experts, such as humanitarian field operators and crisis managers at the local, regional, national, and even international levels, who engage in mediation work and must possess intercultural awareness. The response to COVID-19 is the latest indication that collaborative work between linguistic experts and non-linguistic experts is necessary. Drawing on the advantages of interdisciplinarity, both unsolved multilingual crisis issues and issues with existing solutions could have been improved to a certain extent by incorporating knowledge from CT (Federici et al., 2019).

With respect to terminology, 'crisis', a superordinate and all-encompassing term, is preferred to 'conflict', 'emergency', 'risk', and 'disaster' (*Translation in Cascading Crises*). Federici (2020) states that the word 'translation' in CT refers to all forms of language translation in all phases of a crisis. In the International Network on Crisis Translation, coordinated by O'Brien and Federici, CT is defined as:

> the translation of written information from one linguistic and cultural system to another in the context of a crisis scenario, with a view to enabling affected communities and responders to be prepared for crises, improve resilience and reduce the loss of lives.

Later on, they walk a new pathway, expanding the boundaries of TS. O'Brien and Federici (2020) update the definition of CT as 'a specific form of communication that overlaps with principles of risk communication (CDC, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2014) as much as with principles of emergency planning and management (Alexander, 2002, 2016).' Over six years of development up through 2022, CT has made great strides but will no doubt need to be revised in light of further research and practice. Considering its development alongside other disciplines, CT is not a mechanistic conceptualization but a dynamic one, gaining insights from other fields. Hence, its changing landscape comes as no surprise, as we can see from the evolving definitions above. However, the essence of these definitions, considering translation as a way of accessible multilingual communication in crises and as a risk reduction tool, is the same.

The translation side of CT shares many commonalities with standard and conventional translation studies, but the core principle is different. CT is a human-rights-based approach addressing multilingual crisis communication (O'Brien et al., 2018; O'Brien & Federici, 2022). Without this focus, multilingual crisis communication is a

kind of pseudo-Crisis Translation or mechanical-Crisis Translation and thus manifests many failed translation practices, as shown in the books reviewed (*Language as a Social Determinant of Health*; O'Brien et al., 2018). Since there are many languages, many translations are needed (Reynolds, 2019). Within a nation, some languages are dominant while others are minoritized; thus, linguistic oppression and linguicism exist. In the face of a crisis, access to critical information is a matter of life and death, putting linguistic minorities in a vulnerable position. CT aims to uphold the right to access information in crises (*Translation in Cascading Crises*, p. 10) through multilingual provisions that empower people and deconstruct hierarchies, demonstrating a sense of linguistic inclusiveness and a desire to bring about transformative risk reduction. *Language as a Social Determinant of Health* is the best model of this rights-based approach, as it advocates for viewing language (including translated language) as a social determinant of health. In an increasingly multilingual and translation-savvy society, translation is becoming a user-centered activity rather than a text-centered activity. In crises, translation is more productive when attention shifts from the linguistic side of translation to human rights advocacy, equality, the protection of vulnerable people, access to vital information for smaller communities, and improved communication and coordination (*Intercultural Crisis Communication*; *Mediating Emergencies and Conflicts*).

With its foci on human rights and risk reduction, CT goes beyond an inflexible and exclusive text-bound approach because translation in crises involves not just words on a page but also humanitarian approaches. Such approaches must incorporate contextual information about complex risk landscapes, consider the cascading impacts of crisis, and facilitate action, coordination, and collaboration between humanitarian field operators and crisis-affected populations. Therefore, by focusing on transactional and multi-directional communication, CT can shift researchers' attention away from misleading paradigms (for example, pseudo-Crisis Translation or mechanical-Crisis Translation) to more reliable, systematic, and ethical conceptualizations. Likewise, it can divert practitioners' actions and resources to the most commonly ignored groups to change their conditions for the better. There is no doubt that the significance of CT will become more evident in the future, making it a touchstone for addressing the multilingual communication and accessibility problems that may arise in crises of the near future. Stakeholders could adopt the accumulated insights and expertise from CT to better cope with cascading crises and to prevent secondary victimization, as shown in Sections 3 and 4.

3. Multilingual language provisions in health-related crises

Translating health messages in a timely manner is indispensable in most crises. The COVID-19 pandemic is a salient example of this. This section elaborates on how health messages or health-related narratives in crisis situations are translated to help alleviate the severity of the crisis and protect people's health.

Mortality and morbidity rates differ among ethnicities, due in part to the disproportionate distribution of messages transmitted in people's first languages, leading to differing levels of awareness of how people can protect themselves in crises (Rodríguez Vázquez and Torres-del-Rey, 2019, *Translation in Cascading Crises*). Because health status is affected by access to multilingual health information, linguistically marginalized

people risk being put at a disadvantage. Therefore, the importance of multilingual health information access and accessibility of multilingual health information in crises is crucial.

One challenge is that health information is often characterized by complex jargon. Employing technological assistance for intralingual translation improves comprehensibility and can help people gain access to health-related messages (Rossetti, 2019, *Translation in Cascading Crises*). CT's value derives from its human-rights-based approach emphasizing access to information because many conventional, non-CT practices have no effect or even 'backfire' by decreasing health information accessibility and comprehensibility.

Without sufficient access to health information, people are disempowered, and they receive minimal health education and are unable to change their behavior or take suggested prophylactic actions (Cox and Gutiérrez, 2016, *Mediating Emergencies and Conflicts*). They may become unwitting disease-spreaders or rule-breakers during life-threatening emergencies. Hence translation's value: it shapes discursive configurations, opinions, and perceptions of health risks and hazards and, in turn, affects people's actions (Spoturno, 2022, *Language as a Social Determinant of Health*) improving patients' adherence to guidelines and thus their safety (Hu, 2022, *Language as a Social Determinant of Health*; Resurreccio, 2019, *Translation in Cascading Crises*). In some cases, healthcare translators can be considered healthcare professionals (Souza, 2019, *Translation in Cascading Crises*).

Many studies in the books examined here explore widespread concerns about multilingual language provision in health-related crises, providing diverse epistemological perspectives. CT also emphasizes intralingual and intersemiotic translation to better address access inequality to multilingual health information and entrenched implicit and explicit health information accessibility issues. In this way, people with a range of skills and abilities may all gain a better understanding of health hazards, and when they comprehend and trust the message, they are more likely to take preventive measures. Otherwise, inaccessible health information exacerbates risk cascades.

4. Multilingual language provisions in migration-related crises

Crises are inevitable, but social amplifications of crises make them discriminatory so that they cause more harm to certain people, especially minoritized communities, including migrants, refugees, and displaced people, who may be at greater risk if they do not speak the dominant language. CT proactively disrupts the entrenched 'neutral' linguistic hierarchy and takes an interventionist approach to adjust the unbalanced distribution of multilingual information in crises to protect informational and linguistic rights.

This section is devoted to discussing multilingual migratory crises. Many chapters in these four books cast a critical eye on migration issues, with a special focus on narratives spread through media and multilingual aids in communication with stakeholders such as governments, refugees, migrants, and citizens. Within the field of CT, translation in such contexts can build resilience and maintain unity while nurturing diversity, providing necessary help, and resolving conflicts.

Migrants in a crisis face another layer of risk, potentially causing more harm than the crisis itself, for example xenophobia and racism. The different statuses of languages lead to social differences and stratification, senses of belonging (or not) and unequal power

relations. In increasingly multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural societies, monolingual and monocultural mindsets are outdated and untenable. When language becomes a barrier, it prevents migrants from making their voices heard, marginalizing them even more. In the context of the monolingual habitus, migrants have their linguistic repertoires restricted. CT underscores the rights-based intercultural communication and upholds the belief that no one should be left out, regardless of their religious, cultural, or linguistic background.

In some circumstances, intercultural mediation can be a double-edged sword, both offering help and causing problems (Filmer, 2019, *Translation in Cascading Crises*). On the one hand, translation of materials in minority languages is negatively influenced by the majority languages and linguistic hegemony, increasing confusion among migrants (Dawood, 2022, *Language as a Social Determinant of Health*). On the other hand, translation aids refugee operations and language access. Translation can be viewed as a form of social activism and solidarity (Čemerin, 2021, *Intercultural Crisis Communication*). The flow of migration often results in chaos and conflict, but accessible communication can mitigate misunderstandings between relief personnel and migrants.

Global interconnectedness and interdependence lead to more human mobilization which breeds more communicative issues. Therefore, it should be high on the agenda of researchers in CT to provide effective linguistic and intercultural solutions. Migratory crisis is a complicated social and geopolitical issue. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of appropriate access in people's native language in emergencies and by the misrepresentation of reality and mistranslation of information, revealing hostile intentions. Awareness of the stakes of multilingual and multicultural communication provided by CT will thus be beneficial to address the issues in migratory crises. With a particular attentiveness to human rights and narrative of solidarity, CT unleashes the full potential of translation to protect migrants and displaced populations and help them to avoid risks and reduce costs in crises in the long term.

When translation does not adhere to the core principles of CT, it often becomes little more than a symbolic gesture or form of lip service. Most modern translation practices used in the context of migration address only superficial communicative needs and have a reductive conceptualization of translation – that is, a linguistically-focused approach – that is no longer sufficient. It is doubtful that translation can be effective without consideration of humanitarian and crisis perspectives. The full potential of translation for handling the needs of displaced populations and fostering social inclusion is constrained, which exacerbates and diminishes the social effects and functions of translation.

5. Conclusion: crisis translation as an emerging field

Reading one of those books in isolation may give the impression that CT is a depressing field characterized by a focus on insidious or evident disruption, threat, risk, harm, and so on. However, reading the four books together offers a more optimistic outlook and illustrates that the measures offered by CT can help alleviate the severity of crises. CT's principles and foci, such as translation as a tool for risk reduction and disaster management, disaster relief, and empowerment, are the silver lining amid cascading multilingual crises, highlighting its effectiveness at pragmatically addressing current and future real-world issues.

To be specific, *Mediating Emergencies and Conflicts* provides an early wake-up call for researchers to pay more attention to multilingual linguistic preparedness. *Translation in Cascading Crises* answers this call, providing substantial food for thought, especially regarding the notion of CT. *Intercultural Crisis Communication* refreshes and raises readers' awareness of the role of translation in crises. *Language as a Social Determinant of Health* provides the latest application of ideas taken from CT and successfully testifies to the part it plays in resolving multilingual communication issues and supporting risk reduction. O'Brien and Federici, among others, have established CT, which is able to adopt interdisciplinary insights; it has already made—and will continue to make—significant strides in the future because it offers a path out of the quagmire of multilingual and multicultural communication issues.

However, as a particularly promising and flourishing research area, CT needs fine-tuned and in-depth development to sharpen its profile. Because of the vastness of its concerns in its early stages, CT as it currently stands borrows heavily from other fields, but not vice versa. In addition, one might hope to see more detailed and applicable theoretical orientations, analytical frameworks and research methodologies to address not only health and migration but also climate-related hazards or crises such as fire, tsunami, and floods, not to mention economic crises, corporation crises, to name just a few. Moreover, many studies have been focused on problems encountered *during* crises, while less attention has been paid to problems encountered *before* and *after* crises. Other forms of context-specific translation used in crises need further development, including alternate formats for people with different abilities and communication needs such as sign language, easy-to-read, large print, braille, and audio description formats. However, methods for ensuring that these translation services are used in different kinds and phases of crises in a sustainable, timely, trustworthy, accessible, and effective manner are still understudied. Further research on CT must investigate the interpreting, crisis translator (professional and non-professional) training, the use of translation technology in crises, and collaboration between local actors and international actors to build communication resilience.

First, it is believed that CT, with its strong focus on interdisciplinarity and its rights-based approach, will provide new avenues of research and that, in the future, the knowledge accumulated from CT could lead to breakthroughs from the candle to the light bulb in TS by challenging and revisiting traditional theoretical concepts and methodological approaches. Second, CT offers practical and empowering solutions to real-world challenges and overcomes the symbolic nature of conventional language translation. In doing so, it demonstrates translation's societal significance and utility by supporting multilingual and multicultural crisis communication, ensuring beneficiaries' rights and entitlements, upholding equity, preventing secondary crises and indirect harm due to ineffective communication and translation, and promoting risk reduction and mitigation, emergency relief, and disaster management throughout the humanitarian program cycle.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Shaoqiang Zhang is a third-year PhD candidate at the Centre for Translation Studies (CenTraS) at University College London, where he is pursuing research on translations of health infographics for Chinese-speaking communities in the UK healthcare system alongside issues of multilingual, multicultural, multimodal, and multiformat crisis communication and information design, crisis translation, and accessibility studies. He is a visiting scholar at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA.

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