

A Review of Emergency Language Service from an Intercultural Perspective

Chunyu Yao

Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China

Abstract: Emergency language service plays an indispensable role in effective emergency management when dealing with public health crisis like COVID-19. As an emerging research focus in the field of applied linguistics and emergency management, emergency language service has received great attention of scholars from across the world. Drawing on the studies of emergency language service in the existent literature and practices in different contexts, this article firstly reviews a variety of definitions, research subject and range of emergency language service. Then, a comparative analysis of emergency language services in the US, Japan and China is carried out. Finally, the article points out the limitations of studies of emergency language service in the existing literature and puts forward some suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Emergency language service, Emergency communication, Intercultural perspective.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of novel corona-virus pneumonia (COVID-19) swept the world at the end of 2019, almost all countries in the world have been involved in the global battle against the epidemic. Effective preventing and controlling of the epidemic requires not only the cooperation between the members of the medical team, but also the effective communication between doctors and patients. As the carrier of information and a tool for communication, it is no doubt that language, particularly emergency language, plays an indispensable role in effectively assisting in handling global public health emergencies such as COVID-19.

Emergency language service can be helpful throughout whole process of epidemic management. Language technology can be used to detect the multi-modal signals that capture the hidden danger information of the epidemic before its outbreak. Emergency language can also be helpful in terms of effective doctor-patient communication, publicity of knowledge about epidemic prevention and protection, release and collection of multilingual epidemic information, emergency discourse communication and news narrative, public opinion monitoring, and rumor management and control during the epidemic period. Psychological counseling and social support after the epidemic also belong to the category of emergency language services. Obviously, emergency language service plays a key part in the national emergency management system. Thus a well-established emergency language service system is of great significance to the modernization of national governance system and governance capacity [18].

2. Conceptualization of Emergency Language Service

With the outbreak and spreading of global public health emergencies such as COVID-19, research on emergency language service has attracted great attention of scholars across the globe, and has become one of the hot topics in language service studies [2,3,8,10,16,17]. The study of emergency language is an emerging and important subject in the field of applied linguistics. Emergency language service

is one of the important means to reduce social public crisis and disaster risk. It is also the core component of humanitarian information activities. Many countries in the world have accumulated valuable experience in this area [17].

When it comes to emergency language service, many a scholar defined it from a variety of perspectives and made a lot of elaborations on its components. Fearn-Banks defines crisis communication as “the dialogue between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence”(p.2)[3]. According to Sellnow and Seeger, crisis communication is defined as “the ongoing process of creating shared meaning among and between groups, communities, individuals and agencies, within the ecological context of a crisis, for the purpose of preparing for and reducing, limiting and responding to threats and harm”(p.13)[13]. Drawing on the existent definitions of crisis communication, Pyle defined it as “communication designed to manage the complexities of crisis situations in order to mitigate threats and maximize opportunities for stakeholders, organizations, and communities” (p.16)[12].

Pyle reviewed the definitions of crisis communication, emergency communication and risk communication and made a distinction among them [12]. Different from crisis communication, as Pyle argues, the emergency communication contexts expect total emergency management rather than the focus on communication processes of crisis communication studies. In the contexts of emergency communication, “there is an expectation for preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. Communication is only one portion of a complex set of processes” (p.25) [12]. As early as in 1989, the American National Research Council defined risk communication as “an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reaction to risk messages or to legal or institutional arrangements for risk management” (p.21) [1].

According to a Chinese scholar, the so-called emergency language service refers to “the language service provided to overcome language barriers in the case of emergencies such as natural disasters, wars, medical assistance, accidents,

conflicts and other emergencies involving the safety of national or personal life and property. Its essence is to eliminate barriers, enhance communication and resolve crises (p.32) [16].

Wang et al. defined emergency language service as “the providing of first-aid rescue language products, language technologies or the participating in language rescue operations for the prevention, monitoring, rapid solution, recovery and reconstruction of major natural disasters or public crises. It includes first-aid translation of Chinese and foreign languages, minority languages, dialects, sign languages of the disabled, research and development of language software for disaster relief, dissemination of disaster information, language resource management for disaster relief, development of emergency language standards, first-aid language training, Language therapy and rehabilitation, language counseling and crisis intervention, etc.”(p.22) [15].

In Li and Rao’s article, they argue that language emergency services mainly fall into three areas: language for communication, language for comfort and language for situation monitoring [7]. Agreeing with Li and Rao, Zheng and Xu also put emergency language services under three categories: emergency language service as the core, i.e. providing language products for emergency rescue; emergency language service as the element, i.e. providing language technical support or language use for participating in emergency rescue as an element; emergency language service as the system, i.e. the organic unity of language service and other elements [18].

To conclude, the existing literature view emergency language service as services provided by using language products and modern scientific and technological means to overcome language barriers and deal with the crisis caused by poor communication in the prior, during and post disaster stages in the case of natural disasters, wars, medical assistance and other emergencies that endanger the safety of national or personal life and property. It is one of the important means to reduce social public crisis and disaster risk.

3. Emergency Language Service in Different Countries

Rapid response to coping with and effective management of social emergencies or major crisis manifests governance ability of a society, which has long been accepted at all times and in all countries. However, the language problem in emergency management and response has only begun to receive attention in modern society. Thus this section mainly reviews the emergency language services and practices in the United States, Japan and China.

3.1. Emergency Language Service in the United States

As a country of immigrants, the United States is a multilingual and multi-ethnic society. According to the statistics from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017, there are more than 350 languages used by American residents. Over 60 million residents use languages other than English. In such a multilingual society, the language problem is not only related to interpersonal communication, but also to social and political consequences. If not handled properly, it is easy to cause disputes and even conflicts between speakers of different languages because of ineffective verbal

communication. In case of emergencies, information transmission and communication between different groups are even more crucial. Thus language service in emergencies become one of the important indicators of national language competence [16]. Therefore, the US government launched the National Language Service Corps (NLSC) project, which aims to establish a team of language volunteers to meet the needs of the country’s emergency language service in response to international and domestic crises and emergencies (e.g. post-disaster relief).

The National Language Service Corps is affiliated with the Defense Language and National Security Education Office under the U.S. Department of Defense and funded by the National Security Education Program. Since the project was launched in 2006, it has now more than 7000 volunteers, covering more than 300 languages. NLSC has made great contributions to the construction of the national emergency language service system during the decade past. As a platform connecting the government and ordinary citizens, NLSC provides opportunities for citizens with high level of language skills to serve the country, on the other hand, it meets the needs of federal government agencies for short-term, high-level and emergency language services, and achieves a win-win situation between the public and their government.

In 2013, NLSC was authorized as a permanent institution and continue to undertake emergency language services for the government and the public (p.2) [11]. Since 2014, the members of the language service group have provided a total of 28000 hours of high-level foreign language services including cultural and regional knowledge consultation for 34 federal government agencies, involving 127 tasks and 47 different languages services including interpretation and translation [16].

3.2. Emergency Language Service in Japan

Japan has always attached great importance to public emergencies and has rich experience in emergency management, especially in disasters. Due to frequently-occurring disasters, Japan has continuously improved its disaster emergency management system with the purpose of preventing disasters and protecting the country.

The organization system of emergency language service in Japan closely relies on the disaster emergency management system. When it comes to disaster prevention education and publicity, Japan pays attention to multilingual publicity for foreigners and publicizes disaster related knowledge, such as disaster risk, information release channel of alarm, experience of and lessons from past disasters, and the like. The emergency language service group played an important role in the multilingual publicity of disaster prevention knowledge. Mainly composed of volunteers, the emergency language service group in Japan is generally coordinated by local governments and non-governmental organizations. For example, a voluntary group of emergency language service for disaster prevention was established under the local department of Tokyo government to provide disaster prevention ability training and emergency language ability training and so on [4].

On the other hand, Japanese government provides Plain Japanese for children, the elderly and foreigners to deal with the problems of information transmission arising emergencies to ensure effective communication between the rescuer and the victims. It is said that Plain Japanese have provided much convenience for foreign citizens and tourists in terms of their

daily routines and sightseeing, and plays a key role in disaster prevention education and disaster information release [4].

3.3. Emergency Language Service in China

After the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003, China began the construction of emergency management system. The outbreak of COVID-19 has made the Chinese government take a step further to the future based on the existing system by providing better emergency language services for the public in the stricken area. Thus emergency language service has attracted much attention of scholars from academic circles as well as government employees and volunteers who provide emergency language service for those needed during the COVID-19.

At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan of Hubei province and around the world. In China, doctors and nurses from throughout the country came to deliver medical aid to Wuhan to fight against the epidemic. However, communication breakdown often arose between some doctors and nurses in the non-local medical team and local patients from Hubei because of differences between Wuhan dialect and Putonghua. It was under those circumstances that Chinese scholars in linguistics immediately assembled a team named “Language services group for epidemic prevention and control”. Under the joint guidance of the Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission of the People’s Republic of China, more than 100 experts from universities and enterprises jointly developed a number of emergency language products, including Hubei Dialects-Mandarin Translation Toolkit for Anti-COVID-19, the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Epidemic in Foreign Languages, Plain Chinese Toolkit for Anti-COVID-19 and so on, which to a large degree facilitated non-local medical team with their communication with local patients. Plain Chinese Toolkit for Anti-COVID-19 targets non-native Chinese speakers who master 1200 words and has been proven functional. The Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Epidemic in Foreign Languages includes a total of 75 pieces of information in four aspects, covering entry precautions, daily precautions, protection measures, diagnosis seeking in 41 languages. It aims to provide language related services for Chinese overseas students and compatriots, and foreign students and other foreign personnel in China [7].

4. Suggestions for Future Research Into Emergency Language Service

Drawing on the existing literature about emergency language service and practices in the contexts of emergency management in America, Japan and China, there are much to be done in the following aspects.

Firstly, the theoretical perspectives of emergency language service study need to be broadened and enriched. The existent research on emergency language service across the globe has been done from different disciplinary backgrounds such as linguistics, medicine, journalism and communication, national security, computer science and others by employing a variety of research methods including comparative literature research, empirical ethnographic research, discourse analysis, case study, and so on. However, it is rare to see the studies of emergency language service conducted from the perspective of intercultural communication. As Falkheimer and Heide note that there is very few studies focusing on intercultural emergency communication or intercultural communication

during an emergency or crisis [2]. Pyle also pointed out that little work had been done from the perspective of combination of crisis or emergency communication and intercultural communication [12].

Secondly, the training for the personnel in the emergency language service group is not sufficient. At present, most of the studies on emergency language service indicate that much more training programs are needed for the personnel who are actively engaged in language service, but the training programs provided mainly focus on the multilingual skills and translation or interpreting skills. Very few studies pay attention to the role of intercultural competence of the personnel play in the process of emergency language service. Thus future research can be carried out from the perspective of defining and developing intercultural competence of the personnel who provide emergency language services. For instance, what kind of intercultural competence is needed in the different contexts of emergency communication? What are the components of intercultural competence the personnel should be equipped and developed for effective communication in a variety of emergencies. Are the intercultural competence of the personnel needed the same across different cultural contexts? What are the effective training methods for developing intercultural competence in personnel who provides emergency language service.

5. Conclusion

Human being have been facing one of the most devastating epidemics ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 swept the world at the end of 2019. It poses serious problems for the established emergency management system. This article reviewed the existing literature about the definitions and components of emergency language service, which indicates that scholars with different backgrounds defined emergency language service from different perspectives, however, they agree that emergency communication and language service plays a crucial role in effective emergency management. Studies show that individual’s language ability tends to decline when he or she is under stress [6,14]. Emergency language service are of great importance in contributing to effective communication, particularly intercultural communication, between service providers and receivers in the different contexts of emergencies. Drawing upon the comparative analysis of emergency language services and practices in three countries, this article found out the limitations of emergency language services studies and suggested that further research be needed by taking into account from the perspective of intercultural communication and the development of intercultural competence in personnel who is intended to provide emergency language service.

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