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Communication is Aid – but Only If Delivered in the Right Language:

An Interview with Translators without Borders on Its Work in Danger Zones

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***Abstract**: This contribution aims to shed further light on the role of languages and translation in danger zones through an interview with Ellie Kemp, the Head of Crisis Response at Translators without Borders (TWB), a non-profit organisation that provides language assistance in disaster settings. In the humanitarian sector, TWB is well-known for its work in amongst others the West Africa Ebola crisis, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh, and the recent cyclone responses in Mozambique. Next to providing translations, the organisation trains local translators and interpreters, researches the language needs of crisis-affected people, and raises awareness of language barriers in crisis contexts. TWB is thus active in a number of danger zones that have not been explored fully in other contributions to this special issue, such as health emergencies. This contribution firstly introduces TWB and its activities in more detail, and then shares TWB's responses to a number of questions related to the role of languages and translation in danger zones.*

***Keywords**: translation, multilingualism, interview, contact zones, non-profit organisation*

Recent research has shown that languages tend to have a low profile in humanitarian and development organisations (Crack, Footitt and Tesseur 2018; O'Brien *et al.* 2018; Federici *et al.* 2019). For a number of years now, the non-profit organisation Translators without Borders (TWB) has been working towards filling some of the linguistic gaps in the services provided by more traditional humanitarian organisations active in danger zones. Through its work, the organisation has made significant efforts to raise awareness of the importance of languages in crisis contexts. TWB's

contribution to this special issue highlights some of the challenges the organisation encounters when working in danger zones and draws attention to the increasingly important role of technology for language assistance in crisis situations. As such, the aim of this brief contribution is twofold: firstly, to provide a better understanding to researchers working in War and Culture Studies as well as in Translation and Interpreting Studies on the language needs that arise in present-day crisis situations and the assistance that is provided by actors such as TWB. Secondly, by providing this information on language needs in present-day crisis situations, the contribution highlights which topics may need further research to enhance our understanding of the role of languages and language mediators in danger zones to ensure effective communication in contexts of tension and crisis.

Introducing Translators without Borders

Translators without Borders was originally founded in 1993 as 'Traducteurs sans Frontières' in Paris to deliver translations free of charge to humanitarian organisations such as Doctors without Borders. Since then, TWB has grown in size and has shifted and expanded its initial focus of work. In 2011, TWB registered as a US non-profit organisation, and by 2017 it consisted of three organisations working together: Translators without Borders US, Translators without Borders Kenya, established in 2012, and the Rosetta Foundation, an Irish non-profit organisation with which it merged in 2017 (Translators without Borders 2017a). In its early years, TWB's services were primarily focused on providing free translations in European languages. This offer gradually expanded to include languages spoken in the developing world, such as Swahili. According to founder Lori Thicke, it was through this extension that TWB identified an important gap in language provision: few translators were available for many of the languages spoken outside the West (Tran 2012). From this point onwards, TWB also started building local translation capacity by training and mentoring local translators and interpreters, such as through establishing its translation training centre in Kenya. The organisation gradually moved away from working on a purely volunteer basis, recognising the need for linguists in low-income countries especially to make a living from their translation work. In 2013, TWB created its first crisis relief translation service, called 'Words of Relief'. This translation network has responded to language needs in crisis situations every year since, aiming to improve communications

between crisis-affected communities and humanitarian responders (Translators without Borders 2019b).

Propounding a vision of a world 'where knowledge knows no language barriers' (Translators without Borders 2019a), TWB has been consciously expanding the organisation from a fully volunteer-driven network to an organisation with a team of more than 60 full-time staff members, including for example leadership and management positions on crisis response, language services, and technology (Translators without Borders 2019a). With this new workforce, TWB is now increasingly involved in research and advocacy work: it has conducted several needs assessment studies and delivered research reports on the role of languages in specific humanitarian contexts (e.g. Hasan 2019, Translators without Borders 2019c, 2019d). These studies have provided evidence for the need to communicate with affected people in their own languages, and the implications of not doing so for the effectiveness, reach, and accountability of humanitarian action.

In Translation and Interpreting Studies (T&IS), TWB's work has been discussed from a number of angles. While its earlier work with volunteer translators has not remained uncriticised in light of translation ethics and the organisation's links to the corporate world (Baker 2006; Flanagan 2016), others have acknowledged TWB's contribution to humanitarian relief work through its efforts to coordinate and provide language services in crisis situations (Rogl 2017). As the field of T&IS has gradually expanded and themes such as crowdsourcing, non-professional translation and interpreting, and translation in emergency situations have started to attract more attention, TWB has also become increasingly involved in research collaborations with academic partners. For example, TWB was a partner in the recent ProLanguage research network on the protective role of language in global migration and mobility, in which it contributed by sharing its experiences of supporting refugees across the world through translators (University of Reading 2018). It is also one of the partners in the H2020 INTERACT crisis translation project (INTERACT 2019), in which collaboration goes beyond the level of sharing experiences. In this project, TWB staff and academic researchers work together amongst others to develop best policies and practices relating to machine translation evaluations and the simplification of health messages. Exploring the language needs of people in crisis situations and

potential solutions has thus increasingly become an interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaborative research effort in which academic partners, non-profit organisations as well as corporate partners work together to develop recommendations and solutions. This interview aims to encourage reflection on how such interdisciplinary and intersectoral research on war and culture can continue to develop in future by introducing the work of TWB as a case in point.

Interview with Translators without Borders

TWB as an organisation

How does TWB consider its role in disaster response and prevention?

TWB sees its role as the expert in language services in humanitarian contexts. We have positioned ourselves as the go-to organisation on language issues by gathering and providing information on what languages people affected by crises speak, what formats they prefer and how they want to communicate and give and receive information. TWB also supports aid organisations on the ground in training translators and interpreters, developing glossaries in relevant languages for aid workers, and conducting comprehension analyses to ensure that information is well understood. We hope that we help the most vulnerable to have agency themselves, by helping to ensure that they can get information in their language and express their needs and concerns confidently. TWB endeavours to always respond where there are language issues in a humanitarian context. Sometimes this is remotely; sometimes we deploy people. Given limited resources are part of the challenge, we work in collaboration with other organisations providing specialist communication services. The importance of this collective approach to multilingual communication with affected people is increasingly being recognised. For example, the former UK international development secretary Penny Mordaunt recently highlighted the specialist services we are providing alongside BBC Media Action and Internews in support of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, in her speech at the Bond international development conference (see Newey and Gulland 2019). We are seeing important steps being taken to communicate with affected people in a language they understand, and our aim is to be part of making this the standard in all humanitarian contexts.

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Mobilising volunteers and translation ethics

What are some of the tensions that TWB has identified between prescribed approaches to ethics and professionalism in translation/interpreting and the lack of professional linguists in many of the languages of crisis-affected people?

TWB promotes recourse to trained language professionals as the best guarantee of high-quality translation and interpreting. We have built a solid community of translators who are committed to our mission and we provide them with training opportunities on the specifics of humanitarian translation. In our work in emergencies, however, we face a situation where much of the language support need is for ad hoc, in-person interpreting services in language pairs for which the pool of professional interpreters is small or non-existent in the country in question (e.g. Greek-Sorani, Kanuri-English, English-Nyanja, Rohingya-English).

In that situation, aid organisations often have little choice but to rely on non-professional interpreters, often people who are themselves affected by the same crisis. TWB has made the choice to mitigate the risks of that compromise solution by developing resources (an interpreter's field guide, a glossary app, an interpreters' working group for peer support) and providing training (both face-to-face and online) on the basics a novice interpreter or cultural mediator needs to know.[1] The training and field guide aim to guard against some of the pitfalls an untrained interpreter can face, particularly in situations where they are interpreting for potentially vulnerable and traumatised individuals. They offer advice for both interpreters/cultural mediators and the organisations hiring them on the most effective ways to set up and run a meeting involving interpreting.

We have also sought to highlight the particular needs of children in such situations. Children the world over often become de facto interpreters for their parents - which can lead to their being party to inappropriate conversations and playing inappropriate roles for their age. One not untypical case recounted to us was where a Bengali boy was asked to interpret for his mother at a police station in

[1] Some of TWB's training material, such as the field guide for humanitarian workers and interpreters, can be accessed through its resource library: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/news-stories/resources [Accessed 26 March 2019].

Rome when a professional interpreter with the right language pair was not available. He was placed in the uncomfortable position of having to relay his mother's account of being sexually assaulted by his father to the police officers. TWB has highlighted the dangers of asking children to act as interpreters, in its research with Save the Children and subsequent research and policy briefs (see e.g. Ghandour-Demiri 2017, Translators without Borders 2017b).

What challenges does TWB encounter when identifying and mobilising volunteers with the necessary language skills?

We have found it can be most effective in humanitarian situations to have team leaders per language on staff to maintain contact with, coordinate and review the work of volunteers. This is the case in our work in Greece, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Mozambique. Often those language groups evolve into friendly work teams, exchanging jokes and personal news on a regular basis in addition to collaborating on work.

Mobilising volunteers tends to be easier in high-profile, sudden-onset emergencies, and harder in more protracted or less high-profile situations. There are also issues when language professionals with the right language pairs are affected by the emergency themselves. We are endeavouring to build up both our understanding of what motivates our volunteers, and our contacts with diaspora organisations, universities, etc. which can help us mobilise support more durably and when the media spotlight is dim or has moved on.

Language can be a proxy for disadvantage. For example, education and other opportunities are often offered only in the majority language. Those who speak other languages struggle in school, drop out, or simply don't go. This puts them at a disadvantage and marginalises those who speak these languages. Sometimes this is unintentional – governments want children to learn a lingua franca – and sometimes it is an intentional policy to exclude a specific group. In northeast Nigeria, for instance, education mostly happens in English or Hausa – demonstrating the high value the Ministry of Education places on national languages. However, the pool of trained translators for other local languages is small or non-existent. There is little chance of a native speaker of one of the other more

than 30 local languages to train as a translator into their mother tongue. That means we need to identify the languages where translation is most needed, find bilinguals with the educational level and language and computer skills who want to work as translators, and provide training. We have done that with some success in Kenya and Guinea; the aim currently is to do the same in countries such as Nigeria, Bangladesh and Mozambique where we have teams on the ground.

Translator/interpreter agency, physical presence, and technology

TWB often does not have a physical presence on the ground in crisis situations, but works remotely, e.g. by translating tweets and text messages. Can you give examples of how TWB's language work impacts on such crisis situations by not having a physical presence, e.g. through the use of technology?

Social media and traditional local media are rich sources during a crisis, and they are best monitored and analysed by those who are not in the field, responding to immediate needs. TWB uses its remote teams, many of whom are diaspora who desperately want to help in some way, to monitor social and local media in the affected population's language and to provide that information to those responding on the ground.

One example was during Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. TWB translators were quite engaged in Tagalog, Waray Waray and Cebuano. The Tagalog team was active in identifying local language media content. During the response, a couple of team members came across a YouTube video on a Filipino social media page of people waving a white flag and shouting in Tagalog. They immediately provided a transcript of the text to first responders. As a result of that translation, including where the people were located, 121 people were rescued.

Another example was the earthquake in Nepal in May 2015. The TWB Nepali team worked around the clock for search and rescue, again handling social media and SMS messages remotely. Collaboration with the Qatar Computing Research Initiative (QCRI) meant information from those directly affected, translated into English, was rapidly relayed to international responders, geotagged to show precisely where people were in need of help.

Remote translation is powerful in that it harnesses the energy of those who are not right in the crisis, dealing with too many issues at once. It also has the added benefit of giving the diaspora a positive way to help those in their homeland.

How would you say the use of technology and digital devices is changing language mediation in danger zones? Which new needs have emerged, and which new solutions for language mediation have been developed?

One really neat and simple tool we have found effective is downloadable glossary apps, which provide translators and interpreters - and national NGO staff - with terminology support on the go. The first was developed for Greece, with the glossary developed by a peer group of interpreters and cultural mediators led by TWB, which TWB then turned into a mobile app. This is freely downloadable and accessible offline, and is of particular value for non-professional language support staff (the case of many in the humanitarian world!) and for language professionals who are new to the often specialised vocabulary of the aid sector. In Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Mozambique we have been doing the same for specific humanitarian terminology - often pretty arcane even for native English speakers! - and we have included an audio feature to facilitate communication with less literate individuals and second language speakers. The TWB Glossaries cover key subject areas such as health, sanitation, and hygiene, and we continue to expand them to include more terminology, subjects and languages.[2]

Social media monitoring is another area where language support can make for more effective intervention – for instance by enabling a direct response to the queries and concerns of people caught up in a humanitarian emergency. In 2017, TWB was supporting Internews in monitoring social media in Greece for rumours, queries and misinformation relating to the situation of refugees and migrants, monitoring reports and translating the information posted by Internews in response to make sure people had access to details they needed from a verified source. The real innovation here is that language support is made available to respond to the information demands of those directly affected

[2] TWB's glossaries can be downloaded at https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/ [Accessed 26 March 2019].

by displacement, rather than being used exclusively for one-way information to that group from humanitarian service providers.

Monitoring social and conventional media in the languages of those affected can also help get them the assistance they need, for instance at times of sudden-onset disaster. When a series of earthquakes and tsunamis struck Indonesia in the autumn and winter of 2018, TWB volunteers monitored media and social media reports and provided translation support in Indonesian, Javanese and Sundanese for the NGO Humanity Road, which relays information to responders in disaster situations.

But perhaps the most exciting area where technology and language can combine to support people in humanitarian emergencies is the development of text and audio machine translation capability in marginalised languages. TWB is working with language technologists, operational agencies, and its unique community of linguists to build that capacity in languages of crisis-affected people that the commercial sector will be slow to reach. We are exploring a range of use cases in disaster-affected contexts, where remote communication capacity can improve people's access to critical information and services. The aim here is ultimately to shift control of communication, allowing everyone to share their voice and access information in a language and format they understand.

Language needs assessments and research

What are some of the most striking or most important findings of your recent research and needs assessments on languages in crisis contexts?

From our language comprehension research across five major humanitarian operations over the past two years, we have found that most affected people better understand and prefer to receive information in their mother tongue. English or another lingua franca is usually not an adequate alternative. Significantly, our data shows that women are most likely to be left out of the loop when language is overlooked. In the 2019 Cyclone Idai response in Mozambique, for example, we found that only 35% of women in our sample understood basic information in written Portuguese, the main language used by humanitarians. This is in stark contrast to 87% of men who understood the same

content. Similarly, a language assessment in Goma, eastern DRC, found that women of all ages, and men over the age of 50, struggled to understand Ebola information in written Congolese Swahili or French. Unsurprisingly, the same groups were those most likely to say that they lacked the information they need to keep themselves and their families safe from the disease.

The challenge also goes beyond language. When asked how they would like to receive information, a majority of affected people opt for oral formats, preferably face-to-face communication and radio. This finding is in line with the fact that audio content in local languages is most widely understood, regardless of age and gender. However, our research also indicates that even people with limited literacy skills often also want written information, such as illustrated leaflets, that they can take home for later reference.

Another important finding relates to the language barriers facing local staff. In northeast Nigeria, for example, we found that teams of enumerators understood at best 80% and at worst 10% of key terms from surveys that they administer. This has grave implications for the quality of the data collected, which informs humanitarian programming. This finding challenges the common assumption that local colleagues can simply take responsibility for meeting language needs when necessary, even when it is not in their job description.

What all of this tells us is that we need to collect data on affected people's language needs and preferences to inform our communication strategies and provide adequate support to national staff. Language as a key component in communications is still too often an afterthought, and few organisations have dedicated resources for language support. Yet it is in every humanitarian organisation's remit to do more, and better.

How would you describe the relationship between Translators without Borders and Higher Education Institutions (HEI)? What challenges and needs in terms of educating translators and developing research agendas might TWB and HEIs aim to address together?

TWB is building its relationships with academics at a range of HEIs. The most substantive collaboration to date has been with partners in the INTERACT research project outlined earlier. TWB and University College London (UCL) have also built on their INTERACT collaboration to pilot the development of language maps for humanitarian use, responding to a lack of comprehensive, dynamic data to inform humanitarian communication strategies. Alongside this, more ad hoc collaboration with individual academics enables us to tap into specialist expertise on particular languages, for instance to vet new translators for a rare language combination. Some academics have similarly been interested to use TWB translations as course work for their students, in order to provide both a real-world and a worthwhile example of the kind of translation they may later do as professionals. We have also been invited to speak at the School of African and Oriental Studies' global lecture series, reflecting both parties' interest in promoting awareness of the practical importance of language in the world.

Clearly there is a broad area of shared interest and complementary capacity between TWB and HEIs such as these, and we hope to explore and build such relationships further over time.

What are some of the future goals of TWB as an organisation?

While TWB will continue to respond to the language needs of people affected by crises, we would like to harness the skills and knowledge of the language industry to create, for example, better language technology tools that people who speak marginalised languages can use themselves. We are leading a language equality initiative, called Gamayun, which seeks to build language technology – voice and text machine translation, mostly – for marginalised languages. We are working with some of the leaders in language technology and a number of our NGO partners to develop use cases for machine translation to be integrated into development and humanitarian tools, for example, by developing chatbots available to community health workers in rural parts of Tanzania.

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