The Use of MT in Humanitarian NGOs in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In the relief operations of international humanitarian organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often encounter language needs when delivering services (Tesseur 2022). This project examines the language needs of humanitarian NGOs working in international disaster relief from Hong Kong and the solutions they adopted to overcome the language barriers when delivering international humanitarian aid to other countries.

1   Project Overview

Providing development aid in international settings requires adaptation to the diverse environments as one of the key components to the daily operation of development organisations. In these settings, translation is one of the most important tools at the disposal of development organisations, as they seek to engage with their local partners, volunteers, beneficiaries, and marginalised groups. This proposed research project will focus on the use of translation, including MT, in emergencies and within the humanitarian aspects of development aid, or more specifically, humanitarian aid provided by International humanitarian NGOs in Hong Kong to victims of disaster in other countries.

The research project is titled *Examining Translation and Interpreting as Inclusion: Language Use in Hong Kong's Development Aid to Africa*. The project started in January 2024 and will last for 24 months. The principal investigator is from Hong Kong Baptist University, while the coinvestigators are from University of Geneva and Free State University, South Africa.

The ways of disseminating information across language barriers have been revolutionised by the emergence of Machine Translation. This study investigates how humanitarian NGOs tackled the linguistic challenges in Hong Kong. From the preliminary results collected with a survey of Hong Kong humanitarian NGOs, it is found that Machine Translation is one of the solutions they adopted for their operations. Machine Translation refers to the automatic conversion of text from one language to another with which grammatical structure and meaning are preserved (Hutchins & Somers, 1992). Professional translations require processing time and extra fee; for organisations that do not include a budget for translation, open-access machine translation is one of the alternatives to professional translation.

Project Aims

This study aims to investigate the impact of linguistic problems in Hong Kong's international development and crisis responses sectors and their language approaches applied to their work with the following aims:

1. To understand the translation needs of humanitarian NGOs in Hong Kong,

2. To analyse the impact of the solutions adopted by these NGOs, including MT, and

3. To advise more inclusive translation and interpreting policies and practices within Hong Kong humanitarian organizations, especially towards the most vulnerable beneficiaries.

2 Research and Methodology

In the first instance the research is conducted by a survey of humanitarian organisations in Hong Kong which had received Disaster Relief Fund in the past 5 years to understand the practice of tackling language challenges by these NGOs .

Furthermore, a survey will be conducted with recipients of humanitarian relief in Malawi in order to gain insight into the use of translation in order to negotiate aid distribution priorities in the local community and establish meaningful relations with the local population, majority of whom use a number of indigenous languages, with Chewa being the most widely spoken national language, followed by Yao, Sena, and Tonga.

3 Results and Discussion

From the 11 initial responses received from 9 NGOs that had received Disaster Relief Fund, it is found that Cantonese (traditional Chinese) and English are the mostly used languages at work. Some of the humanitarian workers reported that they possessed other language ability but not the languages spoken in relief areas which indicates that direction communication between Hong Kong Offices and the beneficiaries is impossible if the relief areas are non-English speaking.

Only less than 20% of organisations hired professional translators. As can be seen from the survey results, humanitarian organisations in Hong Kong do not have translation teams and translation policies in place, and professional translators are rarely engaged to provide translation services. This corresponds with the findings from other international humanitarian organisations (Federici et al. 2019). The data showed that around 65% of the respondents' work routine involves translation, in which 80% of them used Google Translate and 60% of them used online dictionaries as technical support for the translation. The result verified the translation demands within humanitarian NGOs but the solution to the demand is usually resolved by the staff on their own. Regarding the workflow, all respondents who worked in overseas relief areas communicate with their beneficiaries through local partners and contact person that can speak local languages; this reflects the reliance on local contact persons when providing assistance and support for relief areas in these NGOs.

Based on the results, the implications of using MT in humanitarian organisations will be discussed. Some of the issues include:

- **Implications of the Use of MT in humanitarian NGOs**

- **Necessity of standardising the TM in humanitarian organisations**

- **Training of using MT - post editing and evaluation for humanitarian use**

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