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Enhancement and Facilitation of Translation and Communication with Multilingual Refugees

Do Multilingual Refugees Face a Problem of Miscommunication? And How Could We Improve It?

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Abstract

Multilingualism refers to the ability of an individual or a community to speak or use multiple languages. It can be characterized by the ability to understand, read, write, and communicate in more than one language. A multilingual person does not necessarily mean someone who speaks more than one language perfectly.

Keywords Multilingualism, ability to understand, technological world.

INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism refers to the ability of an individual or a community to speak or use multiple languages. It can be characterized by the ability to understand, read, write, and communicate in more than one language. A multilingual person does not necessarily mean someone who speaks more than one language perfectly. Multilingualism can mean having one or more languages rather than the mother tongue "of, having, or expressed in several languages" (Merriam-Webster). Multilingualism is not a recent or new phenomenon but actually goes deep in history when many scholars around the whole Europe continent started translating different texts in different fields from other languages into Latin, especially during the Middle Ages "Multilingual scholars from different parts of Europe were responsible for the translation of Arabic and Greek texts into Latin and the transmission of learning in the Middle Ages"(Cenoz,2013,p.3). In this paper, I will focus on Brussels the capital city of Belgium as Brussels is

one of the few cities around the world that can be officially regarded as a multilingual city. In Brussels, there are three official languages: French, Dutch, and German. Not only the three official languages are spoken in Brussels, but as well as many different languages either due to refuge programs or business reasons. Moreover, Brussels is an urban global city and the capital of the European Union which means many different European nationalities gather and meet in Brussels.

In this scale research, I will try to present the difficulties that refugees or asylum seekers are facing in the refuge centres in Brussels and how could we solve such a problem. In order to accommodate the needs of the refugees and new arrivals, we need to ease the process of better understanding the refugees and find a solution to miscommunication. I will focus on the gaps of miscommunication between new arrival asylum seekers in Brussels and refuge centres' personnel.

The misunderstanding of the multilingual diasporic new arrivals is a very important issue as it may affect the decision of recognition for the asylum seeker or incorrect medical diagnosis. As an asylum seeker, I experienced a lack of communication and difficulty explaining my needs or understanding the refugee camp's instructions. In addition to the two reasons mentioned above, miscommunication generates a gap between the new arrivals and society. Miscommunication or misunderstanding may hinder or reduce the integration of new arrivals into the host nation's society. As Bjorndahl & et al in their study Agreeing is not enough: The Constructive Role of Miscommunication mentioned that "forms of explicit miscommunication are just as critical to challenge, negotiate and integrate individual contributions in collaborative creative activities. (Bjorndahl & et al, 2015, p.1)

Literature review

Translation plays an important role not only in our current technological world but from back deep in human history. Translation helps people to communicate and understand each other and exposes cultural exchange. Translation is a significant factor for refugees and new arrivals. Translation enables refugees who do not speak the language of the country they fled to, to have access to information and services for many issues such as medical purposes. In 1999 Ommeren Van with other fellow co-operators studied the problems of translations during the interviews of refugees. In the article Preparing Instruments for Transcultural Research Ommeren with his fellows were focusing on the quality of the translation of refugees' interviews. Ommeren along with his fellows stated that the translation for the refugees should be equivalent and not depend on the translators' views "the quality of the translation depends mostly on the translators' ability (...) incomplete and irrelevant translated items" (Ommeren,1999, p.1). In 2012 another study has been done by Katharina Inhetveen on the language of refugees and translation. In her qualitative research Translation Challenges: Qualitative Interviewing in a Multi-Lingual Field Katharina suggested that there should be a comparison between the translation and the oral speech of the refugees

during the interviews. "systematic, comparative combination of oral and written translations of interviews, which would serve both a diagnostic and a heuristic function." (Inhetveen,2012, p.1). Katharina verified that translators and interpreters do not follow the literal translation "in oral translations, five forms of translator's decision to depart from the literal wording in favour of a pragmatic translation intended to aid continuation of the conversation" (ibid).

Research question

Misunderstanding due to language barriers can have significant effects and leads to miscommunication. In my paper, I will shed the limelight on the difficulties that asylum seekers face in reading the official documents and instructions in the refugee centres in Brussels. The purpose of this qualitative research is to discover and describe to what extent the facilitation of communication with asylum seekers is sufficient in Brussels' refugee centres and how we could improve this issue. I would question if the asylum seekers and first arrivals can find better means of translation and interpretation in the refugee camps. I would figure out the problem of miscommunication, misinterpretation, and incorrect translation by collecting information from real refugees who experienced living in a refugee camp. Then I would try to answer this question by giving suggestions for improving the process of better communication with multilingual new arrivals.

METHODOLOGY

In order to get high-quality authenticity, the researcher has to choose an accurate and subtle approach to collect and analyse data. In my research, I will adopt qualitative research (interview). Qualitative research is more authentic and pragmatic. This kind of research gives the researchers deeper insight into the phenomenon they study. As Aspers & Corte defined qualitative research in their article What is Qualitative in Qualitative Research as "an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved (...) from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers, P., & Corte,2019, p.1). From my own perspective,

qualitative research Provides a deeper understanding of the problem through normal conversation. During the interview, the interviewee has no need to prepare an answer to the question(s) but rather his/her response comes naturally without any preparation or modification. Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry because face-to-face conversation helps better understanding and clarification. If the interviewee has any difficulty expressing his own feelings due to language deficiency, he can convey his meanings through body language, gestures, facial expressions ...etc.

It was not an easy task to find participants for my research because I'm not living in Brussels. I contacted Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) in Brussels but alas they apologized mentioning that they do not have time. Luckily enough I have a friend who lives in Brussels and through him, I could find five candidates. I have interviewed five refugees who have experienced living in a refugee camp in Belgium and now they live in Brussels. Three of them are Arab Iraqis, one is Kurdish Iraqi, and one is Afghan. One interview was conducted in Dutch with the Afghan, three were conducted in Arabic with three Arab Iraqi and one in English with Kurdish Iraqi. Each interview was conducted separately and lasted for about twenty minutes. I suggested fifteen questions excluding the personal information questions but because of the word count limitation of my paper, I will write down only five questions with the answers of the five participants. I have found from the five candidates' answers that all five refugees faced miscommunication during their accommodation in the refugee camp. There was a big gap between the refugees and the refugee camp's personnel. I will code the names of the candidates by letters and present their answers. The answers I will translate them into English (as they are) even with some structural and grammatical mistakes to ensure the authenticity of the interviewees' actual answers. I will put their answers in italics and my questions in bold for more differentiation.

Questions and Answers

How were you able to communicate with personnel

who don't speak your mother tongue in the refugee center?

(A) My limited English did not help me in most of the situations and I was using body language and facial expressions to convey my messages to the personnel. Sometimes the personnel of the camp could understand, and other times could not. Many times, I was obliged to relinquish my inquiry. (my translation)

(B) I was using my broken English with the personnel and in case they could not understand me they call an interpreter (a Moroccan woman) and through the phone, she interprets my words to them. It was not easy to understand her dialect and she could not understand my Iraqi dialect as well.(my translation)

(C) By my broken English, of course not because English is not my mother language and I cannot find exactly what I want to say or to explain things. It was not easy really.

(D) I was depending mostly on former refugees who can speak better English of mine or I use body language.

(E) If I cannot find somebody to interpret for me I use body language

In which language(s) the official documents were written?

(A) All the official documents were written in French. (my translation)

(B) Everything was in Dutch. (my translation)

(C) I was in the center of the Wallonia part and the documents were in French

(D) Everything was in Dutch.

(E) All the documents were in French, or maybe some words in English but mostly in French.

Did you understand the official documents in one of the official three languages in Belgium? And if not what did you do?

(A) Of course not. When I came to Belgium, I was not speaking any of the three official languages. The refugee has to find a way to understand these documents by himself. For example, I was asking some of the Arabic-speaking refugees who were

before me in the camp to help me but of course, their translation was not always correct. (my translation)

(B) Definitely, I was not able to understand any simple document but I was depending in many times on refugees who were speaking Arabic to explain to me some of the documents or to translate for me the official papers which come from the CGRS. To be honest I suffered a lot because even the refugees who were translating for me used to tell me that they are not sure of their translation. (my translation)

(C) No of course; I had to find someone to help me and in my center were refugees from Africa and when they translate for me into English it was not enough because my English is broken and they speak English broken also. So, it was not easy at that time.

(D) No, because at that time I was not speaking Dutch or French.

(E) No, at the beginning it was very difficult because I was not speaking French. I used to ask for help from other refugees who can speak Farsi to interpret or translate for me.

How could you find an interpreter (translator)? Were there certain organizations that could provide you with voluntary interpreters or you had to pay for an interpreter(translator)?

(A) There was no such organization that provides me with a translator. One time I needed to translate a paper and it was necessary for my case of asylum. I asked many friends and refugees then they sent me to a translator, and I paid for him.

(B) I do remember when I asked for a refugee, the CGRS gave me a paper with the telephone numbers of translators, and I have to call and make an appointment for translation and pay for that as well with my broken English.

(C) In the center no. It was difficult to find one to translate for you.

(D) The documents and official papers were all in Dutch, but six months after my arrival, during which a huge number of Syrians also came, they hung some signs in the refugee center in Arabic, for example, this is forbidden, eating times, and so on.

(E) As a refugee, I had to look for an interpreter by myself and sometimes I had to pay for.

Do you think your case's decision was delayed due to misinterpretation?

(A) The decision of my recognition was delayed because the interpreter could not assure my Iraqi nationality through my dialect or accent and I had to bring many other documents to confirm that I'm from Iraq. While I heard from my peer refugees that the interpreter if he was from their country would directly know their origin from their dialect and accent.

(B) Yes, I think because I stayed more than one year and a half. That can happen because of a misunderstanding, maybe.

(C) I can say 100% my case was delayed because of the misinterpretation. After months I found a translator then I gave him my statement (the interpretation of my answers was printed and given to me to check whether these are my words or not). I found many things were not mentioned by the interpreter to the interviewer, maybe he could not interpret them I don't know, and many things were written not in the way I answered which gave another meaning.

(D) I do not think so

(E) For me the interview was good because the interpreter they brought to me was speaking the same dialect that speak.

RESULTS

The results I have found through the five interviews that asylum seekers and new arrivals are facing difficulties to understand the regulations and instructions of the refugee centres. Not only instructions but as well as difficulty to communicate with the refugee centre's staff. One of the interviewees pointed out a serious issue is that he could not describe his illness to the doctor of the refugee centre and therefore the disease was not correctly diagnosed. I figured out from the interviewees that the official documents from Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) were not translated into their mother tongues but were mostly written either in French or Dutch. The new arrivals (the majority)

normally do not speak or understand these two languages and thus they could not understand what is in these official documents. Both the refugee centres and the CGRS have no clear policy to provide any organization or institution for translation or interpretation to the refugees. As a consequence, the refugee has to find a translator and has to pay for it as well. All five interviewees used to turn to former refugees for translation and of course, they could not be sure whether the translation correct is or not. The only interpreter(s) they had was during the interview(s) in the CGRS office in Brussels and even then, the five interviewees assured that they were not able to be certain whether the interpretation was identical to what they said or share the same information they wanted to deliver because the interpretation was either in French or Dutch. And three of the interviewees were misjudged during the interviews by the interviewers and delayed in being recognized as refugees due to misinterpretation.

Suggestions for Facilitations

According to what I have learned from the five interviewees, to improve the process of communication, I would suggest that the CGRS office divide the refugees into groups depending on their languages. I mean each refugee centre (building) receives asylum seekers who speak the same language. And then the refugee centre can employ one or two members of its staff who can speak this language. In this case, the refugee centre can save time to understand the refugees and reduce the difficulty of miscommunication with the new arrivals. Another facilitation the refugee centre can provide for the new arrivals is free Wi-Fi internet. The asylum seekers can make use of Google Translate or any other translation programme to understand the official documents and to ease communication with the refugee centre's staff. Also, I can suggest that the refugee centres to have contact with organizations, institutions, universities, or colleges that can help with correct translations or provide interpreters for some languages. There are some nuances and expressions that can only be translated if the translator is from the same cultural background. During the interview, I think it will be more

accurate if CGRS finds a translator who not only speaks the same language but also the same or close dialect of the asylum seeker to avoid misunderstandings due to differences in dialects.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued three key points that the multilingual new arrivals in Brussels suffer from. From the answers of the interviewees, I figured out that asylum seekers face a real problem in communication with the personnel of the refugee centres. Another point is that the refugees are suffering to understand the official documents because the documents are not being translated into their mother tongues. There is also a problem the refugees are facing: during the interview in the CGRS office, the interpreter is not (mostly) speaking the same dialect which can lead to a misunderstanding and consequently, the asylum seeker will be misjudged. In my paper, I wanted to find out whether multilingual new arrivals in Brussels can find better treatment as far as it concerns the language. I think it is quite significant to shed light on such important issues because miscommunication may as a consequence lead to frustration, isolation, and detachment from the society of the host country. The misunderstanding may also lead to a wrong diagnosis of the disease. The three suggestions previously mentioned are the solutions I suggested to avoid or at least to reduce such problems that the asylum seekers are facing in Brussels. Because of the limitation of my research, I could not figure out more critical issues that refugees in Brussels may have. Maybe in the future, someone else can find more details and give better solutions for the issue I have discussed.

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