

On the front line

Wine Tesseur introduces a new research project to explore how NGOs tackle cross-cultural communication in their development programmes



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Translating and interpreting for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities has gained more visibility over the past few years through initiatives such as Translators without Borders and Charity Translators. Although these initiatives can provide for some of the language needs of NGOs, the bulk of translation and interpreting work is left to be dealt with by the NGOs themselves.

Translation policies at NGOs were explored earlier this year during two workshops at the University of Reading and at Aston University, Birmingham. These workshops, which were attended by both NGO practitioners and academics, revealed the often low profile of language issues in NGOs and charities and the limited funding available for language work. NGOs do not tend to have formal language policies, and evaluative processes usually omit any reference to language.

With these issues in mind, the University of Reading has now launched a new research project, The Listening Zones of NGOs: Languages and Cultural Knowledge in Development Programmes. The three-year project aims to raise awareness of the importance of foreign languages and cultural knowledge in development work and produce practical guidance for NGO practitioners, translators and interpreters. It is being run in partnership with the University of Portsmouth and the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The focus will be on some of the key issues highlighted by NGO practitioners in the workshops.

'Just listen'

The starting point of the project will be to explore the concept of listening. NGOs traditionally position themselves as listening attentively to the voices of the people they want to empower. In development work, this relationship is usually represented as one in which local communities speak, and NGOs listen. Listening as an act in itself tends to be represented as passive and simplistic. We often use phrases – such as 'just listen' – which underscore this understanding of listening. Yet the way in which we listen is influenced by all kinds of factors: prior knowledge, the place

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and context in which we listen, the people we are listening to, our expectations, and so on.

In many NGOs, the role that foreign languages and cultural knowledge play in the act of listening has passed largely unnoticed, even though translation and interpreting practices make encounters in development work very complex. For example, when NGOs hear the same ideas being expressed by locals using similar terms, are the locals really expressing the same ideas, or is it perhaps the interpreter picking the same words and phrases? And how does the use of English, the traditional lingua franca of development work, influence what NGOs hear and listen

to? Are people using the words they think NGOs like to hear, to make sure they will be listened to?

Listening zones

The lack of systematic study of foreign languages in development work has encouraged us to focus on the ways that NGOs listen to their beneficiaries, and the language policies and practices they adopt. We start from the premise that NGOs create 'listening zones', which are shaped by multiple parties and by the local context in which NGO activity takes place. As an initial step in exploring these listening zones, the new project will be particularly focusing on large and well-established UK-based NGOs, such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children and Tearfund. Researchers will explore the archives and online documentation of NGOs and donors, conduct interviews and carry out ethnographic observations.

Collaboration

The project will aim to involve practitioners as closely as possible. Firstly, about 90 interviews will be conducted with people who are involved in shaping how NGOs tackle cross-cultural communication. These interviewees will include NGO staff, interpreters and translators providing services to NGOs, staff from partner organisations, officials from the relevant government departments and members of local communities. Secondly, workshops will be held to discuss results and receive feedback from practitioners. Specifically for translators and interpreters, there will be a research seminar on language intermediaries and translation for development NGOs during the second year of the project, and an international conference in 2018.

But first things first: we want to make connections with potential interviewees. We would like to encourage any readers who are involved in NGO development work or who have an influence on the way NGOs listen and communicate to contact us and get involved in the project. Our interviews are due to take place in the second year of the project, starting in July 2016. If you are interested in joining our list of potential informants, don't hesitate to contact us. 