

TRANSLATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION: SENSE AND SENSITIVITY

ПЕРЕКЛАД В ГАЛУЗІ ГУМАНІТАРНОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ:
ЗДОРОВИЙ ГЛУЗД І ЧУТЛИВІСТЬ

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The article deals with the issue of translation in humanitarian action. It is emphasised that translation plays a vital role in facilitating accurate and timely information exchange, building trustworthy relationships between all parties involved, enhancing the effectiveness of aid, supporting capacity building, ensuring a precise understanding of the needs of the affected population and justifying the resources to be allocated. The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability and The Great Bargain highlight the importance of appropriate communication in humanitarian action. It is stated that communication in a crisis flows in several directions: within the community, from government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the community, from the population to NGOs and aid providers. In the Ukrainian context, the need for translation arises in communication between international donor agencies that fund humanitarian projects, national and local organisations that receive this assistance and report on it, and the people who receive aid. However, translation in humanitarian action is crucial not only for communication as it is but also for ensuring widely recognisable DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) policies. Therefore, the issue of sensitivity in such a kind of translation has principal significance. The American Psychological Association, CLEAR Global, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provide guidelines for using inclusive language while talking about age, disability, gender, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Some documents are directly linked to the present-day humanitarian problems in Ukraine. The author provides examples of Ukrainian and English equivalents from web pages of a number of humanitarian organisations to illustrate the usage of inclusive language to talk about humanitarian action in Ukraine. It is noted that sometimes the recommended lexical units do not correspond to those used in official documents and legislation. We believe it is connected with the need to rely more on the principles of sensitivity rather than the approved clichés to demonstrate respect for vulnerabilities.

Key words: humanitarian action, humanitarian organisation, humanitarian translation, sensitivity, inclusive language.

У статті розглядається питання перекладу в галузі гуманітарної діяльності. Підкреслюється, що переклад відіграє життєво важливу роль у сприянні точному та своєчасному обміну інформацією, побудові довірчих відносин між усіма залученими сторонами, підвищенні ефективності допомоги, підтримці розвитку потенціалу, забезпеченні точного розуміння потреб постраждалого населення та обґрунтуванні виділення необхідних ресурсів. «Основний гуманітарний стандарт якості та підзвітності» та «Велика угода» підкреслюють важливість належної комунікації в гуманітарній діяльності. При цьому зазначається, що комунікація в кризовій ситуації відбувається в кількох напрямках: всередині громади, між урядовими установами та неурядовими організаціями (НУО) і громадою, між населенням і НУО та надавачами допомоги. Якщо говорити про український контекст, то потреба в перекладі виникає під час комунікації між міжнародними донорськими організаціями, які фінансують гуманітарні проекти, національними та місцевими організаціями, які отримують цю допомогу і звітують за неї, та людьми, які отримують цю допомогу. Однак переклад у гуманітарній діяльності має вирішальне значення не лише для самої комунікації, але й для забезпечення широко відомої політики DEIA (різноманітність, рівність, інклюзія та доступність). Тому питання чутливості в такому перекладі має принципове значення. Американська психологічна асоціація, організація CLEAR Global, Управління ООН з координації гуманітарних справ (ОСНА) надають рекомендації щодо використання інклюзивної мови під час обговорення віку, інвалідності, статі, расової та етнічної ідентичності, сексуальної орієнтації та соціально-економічного статусу. Деякі документи безпосередньо пов'язані з сучасними гуманітарними проблемами в Україні. Авторка наводить приклади з веб-сторінок деяких гуманітарних організацій, щоб проілюструвати використання інклюзивної мови для висвітлення питань гуманітарної діяльності в Україні. Зазначається, що іноді рекомендовані лексичні одиниці не відповідають тим, що використовуються в офіційних документах та законодавстві. Ми вважаємо, що це пов'язано з необхідністю більше покладатися на принципи чутливості, а не на затверджені кліше, щоб продемонструвати повагу до вразливих категорій населення.

Ключові слова: гуманітарна діяльність, гуманітарна організація, гуманітарний переклад, чутливість, інклюзивна мова.

Problem statement. Humanitarian action plays a vital role in responding to crises, natural disasters, and conflicts by providing timely assistance to those affected. International, national, and local governmental and non-governmental organisations try to mobilise all available material, non-material,

and human resources to help those in need. However, the issue of translation is not paid enough attention in times of crises, despite the fact that the outcome of the decision regarding the humanitarian aid greatly depends on the success of translation. Humanitarian organisations may assign translation a lower priority

than other activities. Nonetheless, translation should not be viewed purely in terms of efficiency or cost because it is an important means of upholding the dignity of individuals and communities impacted by crises, removing feelings of disadvantage among those working in aid organisations who are not from the dominant (typically Anglophone) linguistic culture, and promoting the development of trust between involved parties [1].

It is the translator who helps to facilitate accurate and timely information exchange, build trustworthy relationships between all parties involved, enhance the effectiveness of aid, support capacity building, ensure a precise understanding of the needs of the affected population and justification of the resources to be allocated. Except for language proficiency, a humanitarian translator is also required to understand and take into consideration various cultural, moral, and ethical issues and dilemmas that should be reflected in sensitive language. As R. Fattah states, “awareness of and sensitivity to vulnerabilities and cultural boundaries are the way to acceptance, trust and hence, access. In this respect, translators – as communicators – bridge the gaps and ensure the interpretation of meaning considers and respects vulnerabilities and sensitivities” [2, p. 2].

The international organisation “Translators without Borders” has conducted several needs assessment studies and delivered research reports on the role of languages in specific humanitarian contexts (e.g., Hasan 2019, “Missing the mark? People in eastern DRC need information on Ebola in a language they understand: A rapid language needs assessment in Goma, DRC”; “Crisis Response – Words of Relief. Are they listening? The challenges and opportunities of multilingual communication in Borno State”; “In need of words: Using local languages improves comprehension for people affected by Cyclone Idai in Beira, Mozambique”) [3], thus emphasising how translation contributes to the success of humanitarian missions. Access to information has been described as a humanitarian good, alongside other basic needs such as food, water, shelter and healthcare [4]. Besides, translating vital documents such as emergency instructions, medical information, and aid information into the languages spoken by affected communities ensures that everyone can access critical data and make informed decisions.

Assessment of the importance of the appropriate language in the humanitarian sector can be understood in the context of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit’s Grand Bargain commitments related to the key aspects of humanitarian organisations’

relief work [5]. Among the goals stated, the biggest role is given to accountability, localisation, and participation. Thus, as F. Federici states, incorporating more systematic efforts on language translation in humanitarian operations is directly relevant to the Grand Bargain goals of accountability, localisation, and participation in serving affected communities [6, p. 3].

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability sets out nine commitments “to ensure that organisations support people and communities affected by crisis and vulnerability in ways that respect their rights and dignity and promote their primary role in finding solutions to the crises they face” [7, p. 2]. All these commitments are connected with communication to a greater or lesser extent. However, Commitment 8 directly indicates that interaction in humanitarian action should be respectful, competent and well-managed, in a safe and inclusive working environment, and in compliance with a code of conduct [ibid, p. 13]. Therefore, the issue of translation in the humanitarian response context is of vital importance for the successful provision of the much-needed support to the affected population.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

While working with the international translation experience of humanitarian action in times and places of various crises, we have come across multiple studies dedicated to humanitarian interpreting where an interpreter also acts as a cultural mediator and faces numerous psychosocial problems during their work, e.g., working in the zone of military operation under the threat of being killed, and a lack of understanding of the local population and their culture. These studies conducted by P. Cadwell, P. Dónal, F. Federici, E. Friel, B. Gerber, M. Hunt, J. Marlowe, S. O’Brien, W. Tesseur are undoubtedly of great importance for understanding the essence of rendering the information from one language into the other in the humanitarian field. However, the work of a humanitarian translator somewhat differs from that of a humanitarian interpreter and therefore should be studied separately.

Speaking about research by Ukrainian scientists that have become of dramatic interest in the recent three years, we can definitely name the peculiarities of military translation studied by V. Artiukh, V. Balabin, A. Bernadina, A. Gudmanian, M. Zaitseva, A. Markelova, L. Neliubin, A. Shcherbyna, L. Volik. However, the present-day scientific terrain lacks studies on the issue of humanitarian translation, which has also become of vital importance for the affected population of Ukraine.

Presentation of the main material.

Humanitarian translation, as a specific kind of specialised translation, requires a clear definition. In the course of this study, we managed to find the definition of “humanitarian interpreting” provided by C. Luchner and L. Kherbiche describing it as “...interpreting practices that fall within the legal framework of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Refugee Law and aim to enable humanitarian organisations to communicate with public authorities, and protected individuals, in order to allow the latter to access their rights” [8, p. 17]. We believe that this definition can rightly be applied to humanitarian translating practices as well, since they also aim to provide effective communication among authorities, organisations and individuals. Communication in a crisis flows in many directions: within the community (e.g. connecting family members), from government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the community (e.g. about how to access services or stay safe), from the population to NGOs (e.g. feedback about services or information about people who have been injured or require help) and for coordination of aid providers [9]. Speaking about the Ukrainian context, the need for translation mostly arises in communication between international donor agencies funding humanitarian projects, national and local organisations receiving this assistance and reporting on it, and people receiving aid.

The study conducted by W. Tesseur, S. O'Brien, and E. Friel among the International NGO GOAL employees as part of a research project titled “Translation as Empowerment”, based at Dublin City University, aimed at investigating the critical role of translation in establishing an equal two-way dialogue between Northern NGOs and the people they work with in the Global South [10]. Some comments provided valuable insights about the importance of translation in overcoming language barriers and delivering timely assistance. The respondents emphasise that translation and interpreting is, and should be, a big part of international organisations; that precise translation for safeguarding terms is very important; that sensitive terms are needed to be explained; and that the role of language and translation is a topic that requires resourcing, especially when it comes to communicating with people receiving assistance and local groups or organisations. The authors also state that a recent study conducted at the intersection of Translation and Interpreting Studies with Development Studies and Disaster Studies has already raised a number of issues concerning the low profile of languages and translation in humanitarian settings [ibid, p. 30].

Despite the fact that translation in humanitarian action is not paid proper attention, there are multiple challenges faced by humanitarian interpreters and translators. Some of them are described from the experience of those working in the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during its mission in Nepal (2005–2011) [11, p. 28-29]. First, while interpreters and translators are expected to remain neutral, however, their social position may affect the way they are seen and heard by others in the field, or by the way they present the information. Second, the human rights field is connected to emotional challenges due to translating so many stories of hardship, most of which they were bound by the ethic of confidentiality not to share. Such emotional labour may cause fatigue and burnout, which is rarely acknowledged by the organisations. Third, there are real and practical linguistic challenges. The humanitarian sector, like any other, has developed its own specific language and even jargon understood only by people directly involved in humanitarian action. It includes abbreviations, names of organisations or specific activities, projects or people. As M. Hunt notes, a key challenge for humanitarian translator is to ensure the connection and to build the bridge between those seeking to provide assistance and others who require help due to a crisis, simultaneously maintaining the fundamental equality of all human beings [12, p. 27]. H. Footitt suggests that the potential for translation is not merely transactional (e.g., allowing NGOs to “give voice” to local stories, listening to aid recipients’ feedback or facilitating accountability) but also a means of instantiating intercultural openness and reflecting “a paradigm of conversation, transnational exchange and narrative plurality” [13, p. 521]. Thus, translation is a place of meeting of people, cultures and even worldviews.

M. Hunt also believes that language and its translation are ethical concerns in humanitarian action, because they are connected to justice in information distribution among crisis responders, and between local populations and responders. Besides, translation helps promote and support universal human values such as inclusivity, accountability, dignity, community engagement and respect [12, p. 26]. Therefore, language becomes a key element in ensuring the widely recognisable DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) policies.

The American Psychological Association developed a “Guide to Bias-Free and Inclusive Language”, where they present the basic principles of talking about age, disability, gender, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. As stated in the first edition, the Guide is

“written to raise awareness, direct learning, and support the use of culturally sensitive terms and phrases that center the voices and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalised or stereotyped” [14]. The guide also explains the origins of problematic terms and phrases and offers suitable, more contemporary alternatives, e.g. *older adults, older people, persons 60 years and older, older population, older individuals* instead of *the elderly, elderly people, the aged, aging dependents, seniors, senior citizens*. The same is applied for Ukrainian: *люди старшого віку, люди третього віку, люди у віці 60+ / 75+ instead of люди у віці, старі, бабусі та дідуся, люди пенсійного віку / пенсіонери, люди поважного віку, люди похилого віку*. To mind the principles of sensitivity, the Ukrainian equivalents applied in the humanitarian action context can be found in the barrier-free handbook [15].

«У Кропивницькому релокована з Донеччини ГО «Вік щастя» підтримує **людей старшого віку** та створює для них простір однодумців». [1a]

“Age of Happiness, a non-government organisation that had to relocate from Donetsk Oblast to Kropyvnytskyi in Kirovohrad Oblast because of the war, was founded to support **older people** through creating activities for them.” [2a]

Another example concerns disabilities. The discussion of person-first versus identity-first language was first applied to issues regarding people with disabilities. Although this definition provides examples from the disability context, the language has been broadened to refer to other identity groups as well, e.g., *person with a disability, person who has a disability, disabled person, people with intellectual disabilities, person with a physical disability* instead of *special needs, differently abled, multabled, physically challenged, mentally challenged, mentally retarded, handi-capable, handicapped, suffering with...* [disability or condition]. The same is for Ukrainian: *людина з інвалідністю, людина з фізичними / сенсорними / психічними / інтелектуальними / ментальними порушеннями, людина з порушеннями опорно-рухового апарату, людина з порушеннями рухової функції* instead of *інвалід, людина з обмеженими можливостями / людина з обмеженими фізичними можливостями, людина з особливостями, людина з особливими потребами, каліка, людина з нюансами, особлива людина, неповноцінний, неповносправний, недієздатний, страждає на інвалідність, інклюзивні люди*.

«Завдяки гранту, отриманому від Fight For Right за проектом «Лідерство жінок з інвалідністю в громадах», **сім дівчат з інвалідністю** навчалися в студії @by.stavnykovychart і упро-

довж двох місяців створили 23 картини для виставки». [3a]

“In January, 2025, **seven young women with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities**, students of the “Stavnykovych art studio”, for the first time presented their art works at the exhibition ‘Just Drawings’ in Lviv, Ukraine.” [4a]

The report by Clear Global called “Communicating about Gender and Violence in Ukraine” provides some examples of the English equivalents of Ukrainian words related to gender-based violence. Notably, these recommendations differ for different communities and groups of people. In particular, service providers and community members reported that survivors do not like to be called a “victim” but prefer more neutral or legal terms like “affected person” or “person in need of assistance.” [16, p. 7]. They propose such options as *постраждала/-ий (affected person), потерпіла/-ий (affected person), людина, яка зазнала насильства (person who has experienced violence), людина, яка звернулася по допомогу (person seeking assistance)*. The same applies to conflict-related violence (CRV) that has become rather widespread in Ukraine due to the full-scale war.

“A comprehensive recovery and rehabilitation program for **women and girls affected by gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence**, was held in Zakarpattia.” [5a]

«На Закарпатті відбулася програма цілісного відновлення та реабілітації **жінок та дівчат, які постраждали від гендерно зумовленого насильства, зокрема, і сексуального насильства, зумовленого війною**». [6a]

The document prepared by OCHA provides guidance on the suggested language to use when reporting on the humanitarian impact of the war in Ukraine, as well as the overall humanitarian response in the country. The document states that the proposed language complies with international humanitarian law (IHL) and recognises sensitivities to publicly refer to the situation in Ukraine [17]. The general recommendations provided in the document include using neutral and factual language to describe incidents, situations and parties to the conflict and avoiding value-laden and controversial terms, or words with political and military connotation (e.g., instead of the word “occupation” it is recommended to use “under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation”, instead of “military operation”, “aggression”, “conflict” – the word “war” taking into account the sensitiveness of the topic); respecting the dignity of people who have been impacted (e.g., avoiding “victimising” language, including the word “victims”) using the wording “survivor/

survivors” (for GBV or CRV survivors instead, and avoiding reducing people to a category, for example referring to people as “IDPs” or dehumanising ones, like “populations”, but using, where it is possible, humanising terms like “families, communities, girls, boys, women and men – displaced”); avoiding humanitarian jargon to provide clarity; and using inclusive language. The latter refers not only to gender issues but also to age, religion, race, ethnicity, cultural identity, ability, socioeconomic status, marital status, immigration status, faith, and sexual orientation. As in the humanitarian context we are talking primarily about the vulnerable groups, it is essential for translators to be aware of the appropriate equivalents of English and Ukrainian terms and set expressions.

The terms included there are also connected with the crisis definition and its stages (e.g., *the conflict in Ukraine, which escalated into a war in February 2022 (to combine the two phases of the conflict)* – *конфлікт в Україні, який перетворився на повномасштабну війну в лютому 2022 року*); *regions/ areas affected, by controlling forces (e.g., areas of Donetsk, Luhansk, Khersonsk and Zaporizka oblasts under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation (not occupied/ under occupation; not NGCA)* – *райони Донецької, Запорізької, Луганської та Херсонської областей під тимчасовим військовим контролем Російської Федерації*; *front line (not contact line)* – *лінія фронту*); *people impacted by the war (humanising words)* (e.g., *affected people (avoid population, persons)* – *постраждали люди, internally displaced people (not persons)* – *внутрішньо переміщені особи, people receiving assistance; people reached by aid workers (avoid beneficiaries/ people benefitting from assistance)* – *люди, які отримують допомогу, отримувачі допомоги, people (not individuals)* – *люди (віддавати перевагу порівняно з “особами”)*, *civilians killed/injured (more humanising than civilian casualties)* – *загиблі/поранені серед цивільного населення, загиблі/поранені мирні мешканці*).

“Multipurpose cash assistance offers people affected by crises the flexibility and dignity to choose how to cover their needs”. «Багатоцільова грошова допомога забезпечує людям, постраждалим від кризи, гнучкість підтримки та повагу щодо їхнього вибору для задоволення потреб». [7a]

«ГО «Дівчата» за підтримки Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH оголошує про старт ініціативи «Зміцнення громадянського суспільства та малих громад: гендерно-чутливе відновлення та реінтеграція в Україні»...Для кого цей проєкт? Постраждалі від війни жінки, дівчата та хлопці у малих або віддалених громадах» [8a].

“The NGO Girls announces the launch of the initiative “Strengthening civil society and small communities: gender-sensitive recovery and reintegration in Ukraine” implemented with the support of Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH... Who is this project for? War-affected women, girls, and boys in small or remote communities” [9a].

Looking at these guidelines, we can notice that not all of the recommendations are usually observed in the humanitarian context. For instance, the term “IDPs” denoting internally displaced people is more widely used and generally accepted than “families, communities, girls, boys, women and men – displaced”.

“A key message of the project is recognising IDPs as a resource for growth” [10a].

«Одним із ключових меседжів проєкту є визнання значення внутрішньо переміщених осіб (ВПО) як ресурсу для зростання» [11a].

We believe there are two prime reasons for such a phenomenon. First, the abbreviation is shorter and easier to use instead of a wordy descriptive phrase. It has been used for quite a long time and is already widely known. Secondly, the humanitarian action context should be distinguished from the political or legal one. This implies that what is appropriate and stated in the legal or accounting/reporting systems may not always take into account the sensitivity of the issue, which is more important in communication with the affected people rather than complying with the legal terms. Inclusive language is mostly a part of the social field that develops and changes much faster than the legal one. Thus, we can see the difference between the generally approved terms and those recommended for usage in communication with the affected people, aimed to demonstrate respect for their dignity.

Conclusions. After analysing the essence, principles and recommendations for translation in humanitarian action, we have come to the following conclusions:

Humanitarian translation is essential for facilitating accurate and timely information exchange, building respectful and reliable relationships among all the humanitarian actors, and enhancing the effectiveness of aid. Thus, it should be paid more attention in humanitarian organisations in times of crises, because the outcome of the decision regarding the humanitarian aid greatly depends on the success of the translation.

Translation in humanitarian action requires awareness of inclusive and sensitive language as well as specific humanitarian jargon to ensure effective communication. Fortunately, nowadays huge international humanitarian organisations like OCHA, Translators without Borders, CLEAR Global, American Psychological Association, among

others, conduct studies and provide guidelines on the appropriate linguistic equivalents to talk about age, disability, gender, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status that comply with DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) policies. The examples provided demonstrate the practical application of these guidelines.

Humanitarian translation differs from other kinds of translation since it does not always rely on the

terms typically used in legislation. Although one of the functions of translation in humanitarian action is ensuring the exercise of human rights and compliance within the legal framework of International Humanitarian Law and International Refugee Law, the real-life situation may be different and require the translator to rely more on the principles of sensitivity rather than the approved clichés to demonstrate respect for vulnerabilities.

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