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‘THESE ARE ALL OUTSIDE WORDS’: TRANSLATING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN NGOS’ PROJECTS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND MALAWI

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the challenges encountered by NGO staff when translating the discourse of international development into the local languages of low-income countries as part of their efforts to communicate with the communities with which they work and to deliver successful projects. Development discourse is characterised by the use of vague and complex English buzzwords, which are not directly translatable into other languages and carry culturally specific connotations. This issue has rarely been problematized in Development Studies or in Translation Studies.

We address this gap by drawing on data from 69 semi-structured interviews with staff from international and Southern NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Malawi. Participants were asked to explain how they translated development discourse when designing, delivering or evaluating development projects and to describe the linguistic and cultural challenges they encountered when doing so. They were also asked to evaluate the impact of translation and interpreting issues on project outcomes.

Our findings indicate that poor translation of buzzwords can seriously compromise the ability of communities to understand the purpose of projects and to participate in them in a meaningful way. The findings also underline the value of using local interpreters to build understanding and trust between NGOs and communities.

Keywords: *development, NGOs, discourse, buzzwords, informal translation and interpreting, Central-Asia, sub-Saharan Africa*

1. INTRODUCTION

Development is currently often described not just as economic progress but as a process that is human-centred, in which people’s ability to participate in the life of the community, their empowerment and human security are central (Hopper 2012, p. 30). A large portion of work on sustainable and participatory development is undertaken by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and typically takes the shape of delivering development projects. In order to achieve their stated aims, INGOs increasingly work in partnership with local NGOs and grassroots organisations, referred to in this article as Southern NGOs.



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The various actors involved in the development process are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, INGOs have generally originated in the global North, and they often use English as their lingua franca, a language they share with international donors such as the EU and the UN (Roth 2018; Tesseur 2017). At the same time, their partner organisations in developing countries tend to speak local languages. English may not be their first language, and they may have limited fluency in it. Development projects therefore tend to be multilingual efforts in which translation and interpreting between the different languages of actors occur. Despite the centrality of these interlingual practices in development projects, recent research has shown that languages and translation generally have a low profile in international development, and this in a variety of contexts, including health, civil society development and local economic development (Chibamba 2018; Crack 2018; Delgado Luchner 2018; Footitt 2017; Marais 2014; Todorova 2018).

While research on translation and development has seen a recent rise (e.g. Marais 2014, 2018; Crack, Footitt & Tesseur 2018), understanding the role of translation and interpreting practices in development contexts remains limited. This article aims to contribute to this small but growing body of research by focusing on one particular area that has received little attention, i.e. the translation of development discourse in the context of development projects. By development discourse, we mean the language used by INGOs to express ideas and aims in funding proposals, project reports and training events organised as part of development projects, often articulated in a vastly technical language that contains a high number of English buzzwords such as 'empowerment', 'accountability' or even the term 'development' itself (Cornwall & Eade 2010). In particular, these buzzwords are favoured by international donors that have the largest influence on the substance of development discourse, such as the UN or government agencies such as the UK's DfID (Department for International Development) or USAID (United States Agency for International Development). Development buzzwords are notorious for their vagueness and their capacity 'to embrace a multitude of possible meanings' (Cornwall 2007, p. 472). Furthermore, while such buzzwords are used in international development discourses and thus implicitly assumed to be widely understood, Cornwall (2007, p. 473) points out that they tend to exist as loanwords in other languages, and their meaning is often associated with the international donors that require NGOs to use them in funding proposals and reporting. Cornwall and Eade's work (2010) has overtly engaged with the problematic roots and contested meanings of these Anglophone buzzwords. However, the discussions have remained focused on English and have not fully engaged with the difficulties encountered when aiming to convey these concepts in other languages and cultures. Partly addressing this gap, the work of researchers such as MacLean (2007) and Todorova (2018) has explored some of the problematics of interlingual and intercultural translation of development discourse, yet the body of work on this topic remains limited. It is also notable that in the development sector itself, the benchmarks that international donors and NGOs use to assess whether projects have achieved their goals rarely require an evaluation of the impact and the quality of translation and interpretation practices.

This article addresses two key questions: firstly, how English development discourse, with its buzzwords, is translated into locally used languages by NGO practitioners, and secondly, how translation and interpreting practices shape the implementation and outcomes of development projects, according to interviewees. The concept of the development 'project' offers a useful unit of analysis in this article. In the literature on INGOs, a project has been defined as the 'primary unit of planning interventions and of helping people... [as well as] the primary unit

of fundraising' (Krause 2014, p. 25). Different actors are involved in shaping, delivering and evaluating projects, each motivated by different goals and ideals, speaking different languages and stemming from various cultural backgrounds. In international development, many projects have their genesis in a call for funding proposals from an international donor. A project aims to deliver certain development outcomes (e.g. lower rates of infant mortality, greater awareness of reproductive health) within a defined timeframe, and donors usually expect that NGOs will provide a report at the end of the project that details how the money was spent and with what results (*ibid*, p. 25). Collaboration with Southern NGOs and the participation of local communities in development projects is therefore often characterised by a multitude of translation processes during all stages of the 'project-cycle'. These processes range from the early stages of assessment (i.e. to understand communities' needs and justify the project) to implementation (i.e. when the project proposal is put into practice) to monitoring (i.e. when data is collected in local communities to understand the progress of the project and to improve the project as necessary) to final evaluation (i.e. when data is collected to assess outcomes and to produce reports for donors and other audiences) (*ibid*, p. 26). During the project cycle, multilingual staff from Southern and international NGOs often function as translators or interpreters between the various actors involved in development projects: international donors, the INGO's head office (often based in the Global North), NGO colleagues based in-country, and members from local communities. Our article aims to understand how these NGO workers, who are often multilingual but were not trained as translators, cope with the translation of development discourse as part of development projects.

Overall, this article aims to stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue between Translation and Interpreting Studies and Development Studies. By drawing attention to the critical yet often overlooked role of translation in development projects, the article firstly addresses the neglect of Development Studies scholars in analysing the effect of translation and interpreting on project outcomes. Given the intense interest in the discipline about the elements that constitute (un)successful project management, it is strange that matters of translation and interpreting have received little attention (Golini, Kalchschmidt & Landoni 2015; Ika & Hodgson 2014). Secondly, in the context of Translation and Interpreting Studies, the article provides further data on translation practices in development contexts and in the work of NGOs. This will enrich current discussions and insights in these disciplines on translation in development, crisis and conflict settings (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2018; Federici 2016; Federici & O'Brien 2019; Marais 2014; Moser-Mercer, Kherbiche & Class 2014), all settings in which NGOs are very active.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The article focuses on two case studies in Kyrgyzstan and Malawi. The data form part of a larger AHRC-funded research project called 'The Listening Zones of NGOs'¹ (2015-2018), which aimed to investigate the role of languages and cultural knowledge in NGO development work and particularly in working relationships between international NGOs (INGOs) and Southern NGOs (SNGOs, understood as comprising local as well as national NGOs). A third case study on Peru was also conducted (Footitt, 2020), but due to space restrictions, the current article focuses on Kyrgyzstan and Malawi only. The case studies were selected on the basis of criteria such as the different status of English (spoken by 0.5% of the population in

1 More information about the project is available on the project website: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/listening-zones-ngos>.

Kyrgyzstan but an official language in Malawi), the countries' different colonial histories and the different historical periods of sustained NGO intervention (early 1990s in Kyrgyzstan vs. from 1960s onwards in Malawi).

The data drawn on in this article consists of 69 semi-structured interviews conducted in December 2017 and January 2018. Thirty-four interviews were conducted in Kyrgyzstan by Wine Tesseur, and 35 interviews were conducted in Malawi by Angela Crack. The case studies underwent ethical clearance separately at the authors' universities. Forty-four interviews were conducted with staff from international and Southern NGOs with a further 25 interviews conducted with other actors in the development sector such as academics, professional translators/interpreters, development consultants, members of community-based organisations and staff from foundations and donors. Participants were selected through pre-existing contacts and the snowball method. NGOs that participated in the study worked on a variety of topics, including human rights and women's rights, health-related issues, agriculture, civic education, peacebuilding and community relations. For the case study in Kyrgyzstan, contacts came partly through the British non-profit organisation INTRAC, which was an official partner in the Listening Zones project. For both case studies, research was mostly concentrated in urban areas such as Lilongwe, Blantyre and Zomba in Malawi and Bishkek and Osh in Kyrgyzstan. Reasons for this focus included the high concentration of NGOs in these areas and the time of year the study was conducted. For example, in Kyrgyzstan few development programmes would run in rural areas in winter because of harsh weather conditions.

All interviews in Malawi were conducted in English. In Kyrgyzstan, approximately half of the interviews were conducted with an interpreter, Cholpon Akmatova.² Thirteen interviews were held in Russian and three in Kyrgyz. Akmatova's role was critical in developing the Kyrgyz case study. With over a decade of interpreting experience in the Kyrgyz development sector, she gave advice on which organisations to approach, participated in detailed discussions on how to translate the interview questions and key concepts of the research, and transcribed and translated interviews. An overview of the interviews per country, actor and language is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of interviews per country, actor and language

	Kyrgyzstan	Malawi	Total: Kyrgyzstan + Malawi
	34 interviews	35 interviews	69 interviews
Breakdown NGO vs. other actors	25 SNGOs & INGOs 9 with other actors	19 SNGOs & INGOs 16 with other actors	44 SNGOs & INGOs 25 with other actors
Breakdown per language of interview	18 English 13 Russian 3 Kyrgyz	35 English	53 English 13 Russian 3 Kyrgyz

Interview transcripts were sorted into emergent codes using the qualitative software programme NVivo, which facilitated capturing recurrent ideas and themes (Bazeley 2007).

2 Akmatova has given her explicit and enthusiastic consent to be named in this manuscript.

The discussion in this article is exploratory in nature and draws on emergent themes across the case studies related to the translation of development discourse in the context of development projects. The discussion that follows first introduces background information on the NGO sector and languages in the case study countries, before it engages in a more detailed discussion of translation challenges encountered by interviewees.

3. TRANSLATING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN KYRGYZSTAN

3.1 Background: civil society and languages in Kyrgyzstan

International NGOs and donors became active in Kyrgyzstan in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was considered by Western governments as an opportunity to introduce structures of democracy in this newly independent region (Atlani-Duault 2009; Buxton 2011). Civil-society organisations modelled on Western non-profit and advocacy organisations were introduced, and funding was widely available for training events that introduced concepts and methodologies related to promoting democracy (Aksartova 2005; Howell, 2000). The NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan today is to some extent still marked by the initial focus on growing a local civil society. The sector remains highly dependent on external funding, and donor interests therefore continue to have a decisive influence on the focus of development projects and NGOs' activities (Bayaliev-Jailobaeva 2018; Féaux De La Croix 2013). In recent years, donors have favoured promoting advocacy activities as well as conflict-prevention projects in the wake of ethnic clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010.

As the phenomenon of civil society (as conceived by the West) was new to Kyrgyzstan, this also meant that much of its related terminology did not exist in Russian, let alone in Kyrgyz. The use and development of the Kyrgyz language was heavily suppressed during pre-Soviet and Soviet times while the use of Russian was promoted, a phenomenon known as Russification (Korth 2005). Kyrgyz is now an official language in Kyrgyzstan, next to Russian, and it is the first language of an estimated 71.4% of the population (Central Intelligence Agency 2017). However, its use in official contexts remains limited, partly because of its restricted development during Russification. Its terminology in areas of business and technology is reportedly sparse, and many terms relating to such topics are loanwords from Russian rather than having their roots in the Turkic language family that Kyrgyz forms part of (Korth 2005). Another reason for the limited use of Kyrgyz in present-day Kyrgyzstan is that government officials and others in positions of power tend to be from Russian-speaking elite groups (Orusbaev, Mustajoki & Protassova 2008). Russian continues to be the dominant language in urban areas, particularly in the capital Bishkek, and is associated with education, business and better job opportunities, often in neighbouring Russia or Kazakhstan. It remains by far the most popular second language with approximately 34.5% of the population speaking it (versus 9% first-language speakers) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). English, in contrast, holds a minor position as an international language with only an estimated 0.5% of the population being able to speak it as a foreign language (Aminov *et al.* 2010).

3.2 Language profile of NGOs participating in the study

Twenty of the interviews conducted in Kyrgyzstan were with staff members from Southern NGOs (SNGOs). Fifteen of these interviewees were Russian-speaking, yet the rural communities that their organisation aimed to work with generally spoke Kyrgyz, or in some Southern parts of the country Uzbek (the first language of 14.4% of the population) or Tajik

(5.8%) (Central Intelligence Agency 2017). Nine interviewees said they had some Kyrgyz language capacity in the organisation, but this was usually not enough to deliver workshops or to translate material into Kyrgyz. SNGOs therefore often relied on external professionals with local language skills to enable communication with rural communities. These professionals were either professional translators/interpreters or development professionals (here meaning they were paid and usually had experience working in the development sector) with the appropriate language skills, and they were often from rural communities. In terms of English language skills, only four of the 20 SNGOs interviewed had some working capacity in this language, which meant that the large majority of SNGOs was not able to communicate directly with international donors.

In contrast to SNGOs, the interviewees from international NGOs (five interviewees), foundations (two interviewees) and donors (one interviewee) who were based in Bishkek and Osh tended to have both English and Russian language capacity. Six interviewees who worked for these organisations had Kyrgyz language capacity as well. INGO staff often acted as translators between local communities, SNGOs and international donors during visits and project reporting.

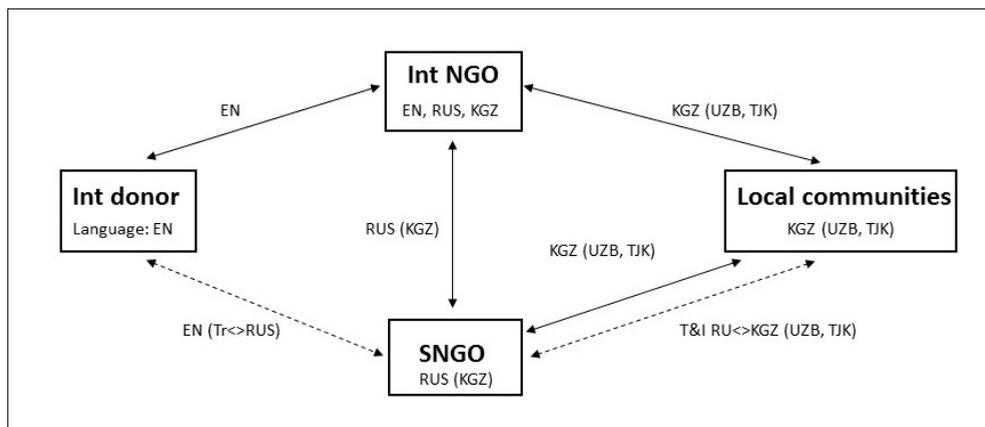


Figure 1. Languages and T&I practices in the Kyrgyz NGO sector

The languages and translation practices in the NGO sector that were most prevalent in the Kyrgyz data are presented in Figure 1. The dashed lines present communication processes in which an external mediator was generally relied on to facilitate communication by translating or interpreting.

3.3 Translating development discourse: Practical challenges

Interviewees’ discussions on translating development concepts often revolved around translation during training events for SNGO staff. Southern NGO staff related that their understanding and knowledge of civil society and of development approaches, as conceived by international donors, were acquired through participating in seminars and workshops organised by international donors and INGOs, which tended to be held in Russian. The language used during these events was characterised by a large number of loanwords transposed from English into Russian. One interviewee explained that Kyrgyz NGO workers

usually 'don't speak English, but they know these words: "actors", "stakeholders", and then they would say "SWOT analysis" in Russian: "analiz SWOT" ' (KGZ 11, freelance translator/interpreter). Interviewees described that, once English development buzzwords had entered the Russian language, as loanwords or as calques, they would then be transposed from Russian into Kyrgyz. An example of this was 'civil society', which was literally rendered into Russian and Kyrgyz as 'society of citizens' (KGZ 34, academic, Bishkek).

While translating from English to Russian was not easy, the real problem was conceived as translating terms into Kyrgyz. Examples of words included 'advocacy', 'civil society', 'gender', 'equal rights', 'theory of change', 'resilience', 'stakeholders', 'franchising', 'lobbying' or specific management roles and functions such as the 'Chair of a board', a term well at home in an Anglophone context. These words thus not only related to development and civil society but also to management and business. For some interviewees (KGZ 12, 16, 20), there was a direct link between these translation issues and the limited development of Kyrgyz as a language. Some civil society organisations in Kyrgyzstan have in fact initiated projects to develop the Kyrgyz language further. For example, a project implemented by Bizdin Muras, a Kyrgyz SNGO, and funded by the Soros Foundation has created Wikipedia pages in Kyrgyz, the number of which has increased from 1,500 to over 80,000 between 2011 and 2018 due to these efforts (Dandybaeva 2018). These activities, among others, were considered by interviewees as an important effort to expand Kyrgyz vocabulary but also as indirectly addressing societal divisions and contributing to nation-building (KGZ 12, 16, 20; see also Korth 2005). However, these initiatives did not readily solve terminological challenges. For example, one interviewee related that, while new Kyrgyz terminology might now exist, it would take time for people to become familiar with the new words (KGZ 12, director of INGO country office, Bishkek). Moreover, even though some terms might be translated, interviewees problematized the extent to which these translations conveyed the often complex meanings of the English buzzwords. For example, one interviewee related that translating 'civil society' as 'society of citizens' conveyed a restricted definition of the concept because 'such a translation doesn't give people an understanding that as a citizen you have a right to speak up' (KGZ 34, academic, Bishkek). Although not emphasised by the interviewee, the translation also implies that non-citizens are not part of civil society.

What was clear to interviewees was that there was a link between language, culture and societal structures, which made translating development discourse difficult. While NGO workers themselves were well acquainted with Anglophone development concepts through training and development literature, conveying the complex meanings of these concepts to local communities was a constant challenge:

[Y]ou cannot just say sexual rights. You have to, to explain it in very simple terms, just to explain say that what sexual rights mean in a family for example, what sexual rights mean for a wife. So you have to, to oversimplify the concepts. (KGZ 10, SNGO director, Bishkek)

Development discourse was described as complex and academic, stemming from ideas that were often alien to local communities. Issues of translation would pile up when attempting to translate longer texts such as training manuals, handbooks or surveys as this meant that entire sentences would need to be unpacked 'and there is an attempt to explain it and I think the risk is that when you are explaining you might also deviate from the real meaning of the intended question' (KGZ 16, staff of international foundation, Bishkek). As mentioned in the introduction, the meaning of much of the development terminology is opaque even to native

English speakers. When translating into a non-cognate language, this then seems to force translators to undergo a laborious and repetitive process of translation and editing. A consultant who had been involved in the translation of handbooks related to civil society recounted the complex process of going back and forth between translators, the intended users of the handbooks and official documents they were drawing on to determine Kyrgyz terminology:

Every time after you have used a translator, you need to check: what is the official translation? What is the local meaning? Editing is extremely important. When we discuss, when we ask for example, why did you translate this in this way? The translator might say: Because this is an official policy document from the Kyrgyz government. But the term may not be understood locally, or may convey different meanings. (KGZ 13, consultant, Bishkek)

After investing an enormous amount of time and effort into developing these handbooks, the final result was disappointing to both users and creators because such a large number of the words were 'outside words', which eventually meant that 'people can understand this handbook the way they like' (KGZ 13). Remarkably, many of the NGOs using the handbook had asked for both the Russian and Kyrgyz versions 'because it helps them to understand: if you don't understand what they mean in the Kyrgyz document, you can go check the Russian. So you have two chances to understand' (KGZ 13). The different Kyrgyz dialects spoken in the North and South of the country were an additional challenge. When commissioning the translation of a booklet into Kyrgyz, one respondent related having 'to order eight translations ... and only after eight attempts, the eighth one was okay, so both people in the North, in the South, professionals, doctors, teachers, they were happy with that' (KGZ 10, SNGO Director, Bishkek).

3.4 Perceived effects on project implementation and outcomes

The challenges involved in translating development discourse as encountered in project proposals, reports and trainings led to a number of problematic consequences. Firstly, because many INGOs and SNGOs had limited Kyrgyz language capacity and because of the various issues involved in translating material into Kyrgyz as described above, interviewees questioned the success of training activities and workshops involving Kyrgyz-speaking communities. Such events aimed to enhance people's well-being and could cover a wide range of topics like conflict prevention or health-related issues. Logistically, when INGOs and SNGOs without Kyrgyz language skills organised such events, they would often appoint two facilitators, namely one Russian speaker and one Kyrgyz speaker, who would ideally be a local development expert. Interviewees preferred working with local development experts over working with professional language mediators because of a reported lack of trained professional translators and interpreters who could provide qualitative translation or interpreting on the topic of development between Russian, Kyrgyz and English (KGZ 16, 24). Yet even when trainers with the appropriate language skills and background were found, interviewees questioned the value of investing time and money in events that had to be conducted in two languages, which would take additional time. Moreover, because NGO workers often did not speak the local languages, it was difficult to deduce whether participants had understood the information, let alone if they would remember it and act on it.

The second important point to make relates to the largely Russian-speaking, urban-based NGO workers and their ability to represent and communicate effectively with grassroots

communities, who speak local languages. Both in the interview data and in the literature on the Kyrgyz NGO sector, these NGO workers were described as having little or no knowledge of the Kyrgyz language and culture, as rarely leaving their urban offices and thus having little understanding of rural communities' lived realities (Féaux De La Croix 2013; Simpson 2010). In relation to translating development discourse, interviewees related that cultural differences between these two groups may further undermine effective communication:

When external people, like even not foreign citizens, like Kyrgyz citizens but from urban areas come to rural areas, the culture of local people ... they don't often question when they are talking to them, it's kind of respect for, for guests coming from another community, or even they don't understand that it's in their culture that they don't show they do not understand, they don't. They keep silent instead of asking a lot of questions. (KGZ 16)

Interview questions relating to concepts that might be difficult to translate *from* Kyrgyz into Russian or English received minimal responses from interviewees, which indeed raises further questions on the ability of urban-based development workers to represent Kyrgyz-speaking rural groups.

Thirdly, while not the focus of this article, it is important to note that respondents reported a vast range of issues with non-translation. SNGOs, who had limited English language capacity, related that project proposals and final reports produced by international NGOs and donors were usually not translated into Russian, let alone into Kyrgyz. Furthermore, SNGOs reported that they often did not budget for translation and interpreting costs that might arise during development projects, which in some cases further hindered their ability to communicate effectively with local communities and ensure successful project outcomes (see Tesseur 2019 for more details).

4. TRANSLATING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN MALAWI

4.1 Background: The NGO sector and languages in Malawi

Malawi has long been a 'donor darling' (Morfit 2011) of international NGOs and donors. Given Malawi's colonial history, links are particularly strong with British NGOs who have been involved in the country at least since Malawi's independence in 1964. The country continues to be ranked as the third poorest country in the world (IMF 2018). Because of this, NGO activity remains heavily focused on addressing the multidimensional issues caused by poverty.

Due to Malawi's colonial history, English remains in a dominant position in the country in all formal domains. The use of English in Malawi dates to the establishment of British colonial rule in 1891 when English became the official language in the country (Kamwendo 2004). During colonial times, English became the language of higher instruction and official domains while Chichewa was used on the lower levels of primary education (Matiki 2001, p. 202). Nowadays, both English and Chichewa have official status. Malawi has a further 12 indigenous languages with Chinyanja (12.8% of population are first language speakers), Chiyao (10.1%), and Chitumbuka (9.5%) as those most widely spoken (Ethnologue 2018). By comparison, Chichewa, with 57%, remains the language most commonly spoken. The relationship between English and the country's indigenous languages has been one of continued hegemony of English with power and privilege granted to speakers of English (Matiki 2001). English continues to be widely associated with education and better job opportunities with English having been introduced as the sole language of instruction from primary school onwards in 2014 (Kamwendo 2005, p. 158; Mchombo 2017, p. 195).

4.2 Language profile of NGOs participating in the study

In the NGO sector, English is widely spoken. The overwhelming majority of respondents had university degrees, and many had postgraduate qualifications. Because of their education levels, it is hardly surprising that all of them spoke English and were bilingual or multilingual. With their multilingual skills, they often acted as translators between international donors, NGOs and local communities. Because literacy levels in Malawi are relatively low (currently estimated at 62.14% (UNESCO 2015) vs. 99.24% in Kyrgyzstan (UNESCO 2018)), communication with local communities mainly took place verbally. The production of written documents and written translations therefore tended to be limited to institutional reporting procedures. Figure 2 presents a generalised overview of the language practices that characterised international development collaboration in Malawi.

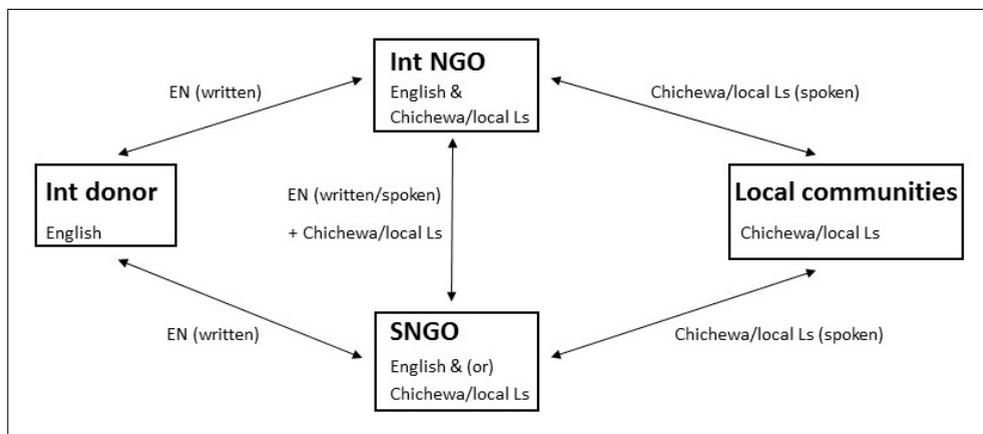


Figure 2. Languages and T&I practices in the Malawian NGO sector

4.3 Translating development discourse: practical challenges

Like in Kyrgyzstan, respondents related that translating the concepts that were key to understanding development programmes and their goals was a challenge. Examples that interviewees shared of development buzzwords that did not have a direct translation into local languages, particularly Chichewa, included ‘accountability’, ‘sustainability’, ‘equality’, ‘development’ and ‘vulnerability’. In some cases, the translation of a single concept would result in several sentences in the target language, or words would be chosen that did not entirely capture the meaning of the original word, for example, by using the Chichewa word for ‘freedom’ as a translation for ‘human rights’ (MWI 20). The result of these conceptual challenges was that the message would be ‘generalised’ (MWI 08), ‘diluted’ (MWI 08, 10) or distorted. One interviewee for example explained that:

What I can comfortably tell [the local community] that this project is all about, is the fact that this project is all about poverty, that’s the only Chichewa translation that is there and also I manage to communicate right. But my project may not be interested in poverty, it may be interested in the resilience, it may be interested in dealing with vulnerability. (MWI 10)

Furthermore, respondents indicated that words to describe development concepts in one community may not work in another, even if communities are geographically close to one another and they speak the same dialect. Challenges could also arise within one community. For instance, words used with a particular group of people may not work with another, e.g. older generations may prefer to use euphemisms to discuss certain taboo topics while younger people may choose to be more direct. These examples indicated the pressing need to treat translation as a process that needs to be highly localised, down to the grassroots level.

Translation techniques that NGO workers described when asked how they dealt with these challenges included using metaphors, similes and proverbs, and unpacking terms by giving extensive examples appropriate to the local context. Respondents emphasised the importance of recruiting local interpreters who were part of the local community (MWI 19). These linguistic mediators were embedded in the daily lives of the communities and could advise on how to nuance messages appropriately to the local context. Respondents explained that these interpreters' translations should be treated with caution as they could be particularly favourable to the village chief, who often appointed them and holds considerable power. Some interviewees related attempts to bypass this problem by having the community appoint an interpreter instead. Despite the potential problems with interpreters being embedded into the local socio-political fabric, this approach was preferred over relying on professional translators:

Sometimes you can get a professional translator, but all the same we still get in some people who are closer to communities, who can also maybe facilitate how best a particular concept can be actually translated, so that once you go and use it, use it in the community, it is not misunderstood. (MWI 02, INGO staff member)

The services from professional translators would usually only be sought when translation was needed at the institutional level, e.g. for the translation of reports, guidelines or project applications. Like in Kyrgyzstan, respondents indicated that professional translators often lacked knowledge on development and were unable to come up with suitable translation for key concepts: 'Some professional translators do a good job linguistically, but contextually, because of the key issues that we're trying advance, we found that problematic' (MWI 04, INGO staff member).

From interviewees' elaborate responses, it was evident that discussions on language and crafting nuanced messages appropriate to the local context absorbed a considerable portion of staff's time. This involved careful proofreading of translations, discussions with colleagues and listening carefully to the terms that communities themselves were using. However, there was a general sense that international donors did not have a real understanding of the hidden language and translation work that was taking place and of their perceived importance to the successful outcome of development projects.

4.4 Perceived effect on project implementation and outcomes

Interviewees considered the challenges involved in translating development discourse and buzzwords as part of a number of wider structural issues of the aid industry that led to unequal power relationships, many of which have been problematized extensively in the development literature (Eyben *et al.* 2015; Mawdsley *et al.* 2002; Wallace, Bornstein & Chapman 2007). Interviewees argued that projects tend to be designed and delivered according to donors' own agendas, which were sometimes inappropriate for the local context or not understood by local communities. Respondents described being pushed into using donors' buzzwords because

of financial dependency although many of these words did not have any resonance in the local language:

You have reporting templates, you have M&E frameworks, those are specific to each donor. Their own language ... and therefore the grantees have no choice but to adopt those languages. ... There's no need for bringing in the word 'resilience', just talk about [*it*] in the local language, you see what I mean? But because they have to report to a donor, they have to use the word 'resilience'. Which means they have to translate it and talk about it. (MWI 09, international NGO staff)

Furthermore, while SNGOs learned donors' preferred buzzwords and discourse, respondents related that there was little effort on the part of the donor to understand local cultural sensitivities through learning terms used by local communities. Such terms often did not have an equivalent in English, which would then 'again provide a bit of a challenge in terms of what do you mean, unless you put an annex or a footnote to the particular word they use' (MWI 11, INGO worker). The extent to which Western donors and international NGOs were willing to learn about such terms was questioned: 'a lot of development workers from the North control the narrative, the language narrative, they are not interested in the local language dynamics at local level, so that tends to compound the problem further' (MWI 18). In this respondent's view, 'there's just a handing down of concepts' without SNGOs challenging some of the Western ideas and the different ways in which local communities might understand these. Part of the reason why SNGOs were not challenging Western frameworks was understood to be the fact that SNGOs' salaries and livelihoods depended on Western funding.

These issues related to unequal power relationships in development were seen by interviewees as further exacerbated by translation challenges. For example, NGOs would only brief communities on projects orally, but 'there is no translation of the technical detail of the proposal to leave with the community members to read once the meeting is done' (MWI 14, ex-official of a donor organisation). One could argue that the practice of written translation would be rendered somewhat irrelevant in a context with high levels of illiteracy. However, respondents presented the view that if the detail of projects is not shared with local communities, there was a huge risk of negative implications such as documents:

... remain[ing] in English, and so communities are not very much in touch with those. [*The documents*] remain very much at the institutional level. And so that in itself keeps the community a little bit in the dark and out of touch ... with what you are trying to achieve. (MWI 06).

Respondents pointed out that the practice negatively affected local ownership of projects. People would not feel motivated if they did not understand why certain changes were needed (MWI 14).

During project delivery, projects sometimes worked out differently and would not focus on what donors had intended to fund. This issue is generally well documented in Development Studies (cf. Olivier de Sardan 2005). Our interviews demonstrate that language may be one among many reasons for this. Donors' buzzwords, which were used by INGOs in their funding proposals, did often not exist in local languages or did not resonate with local communities' lived realities, making it difficult for NGO workers to translate or explain the purpose of a

project to communities. Ironically, because NGO practitioners often acted as interpreters to international visitors, this would in some cases be easy enough to conceal:

So I take you to the community, I will make sure that the words they are expressing are translated into the language that you understand, but were you to listen directly to it, you'd realise that this is not the project that we are funded [for]. (MWI 10a)

Such practices constitute examples of how NGO workers may function as linguistic brokers and gatekeepers who are in control of which information is being provided to whom (Bierschenk, Chauveau & Olivier de Sardan 2000; Lewis & Mosse 2006).

5. CONCLUSION

The countries examined for this study are widely dissimilar in fundamental ways, not least in terms of their language profile, their history of development interventions and the focus of NGO activity within their territory. Despite these differences, common themes have emerged from the findings, which indicate widespread and cross-sectoral problems in the way that international development initiatives engage with local languages.

In both case studies, interviewees reported serious difficulties in translating development buzzwords into the local languages. It can be a slow process to find an effective and culturally appropriate translation in dialogue with local interpreters and the communities. This is not always possible to achieve within the strict timeframe of the NGO project cycle. The meanings of buzzwords are often lost in translation, which leaves communities confused about the purpose of projects. Communities are therefore not fully equipped to participate in project delivery or the evaluation of project outcomes. This undercuts NGOs' proclaimed aspirations to empower communities and enable them to hold development actors to account. Likewise, official documents such as project proposals do not tend to be translated into local languages, which can compromise the ability of communities to understand and take ownership of development projects.

Interviewees in both case studies also shared concerns on how translation issues affected project outcomes, the considerable amount of time and effort they spent on translation and the little recognition they would receive from international donors on the value and importance of this work. Respondents in Malawi and Kyrgyzstan argued that an understanding of local languages and culture was critical for ensuring that projects met their intended objectives. The current data have laid bare the challenges involved with translating development objectives, expressed in international donors and NGOs' Anglophone buzzwords and often conceived of as alien, vague and complex by local organisations and communities. Finally, our data indicate that donors largely overlook the importance of languages and translation (see also Crack 2018), an attitude which further exacerbates unequal power relationships between SNGOs, INGOs and international donors.

There were a number of limitations with this research. Firstly, it is important to note that the data presented relies on what interviewees have *said* they do rather than on what they may actually do in practice. Further research could for example collect ethnographic data on how NGOs go about translating certain messages and concepts in their daily activities, or it could observe meetings between international donors, NGOs and local communities to gain a better understanding of how translation and language negotiation during such events shape the discussion of development objectives and outcomes. Secondly, it should be noted that

the interviews were conducted by two white, European women, both academics, and that in the case of Kyrgyzstan, some of the suggested interviewees had come through INTRAC, the non-profit organisation that was a partner in the project. These details on how the study was conducted may have had an impact on participants' responses. For example, the interviewees may have been reluctant to divulge information that might reflect poorly on themselves or their organisations to 'outsiders' (although the researchers do not have any specific reason to suspect that this may have been the case, it remains a hypothetical possibility). Finally, both case studies feature interviews conducted in urban areas. Future research that engages with rural communities and organisations would shed further light on the role of translation at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, the findings presented in this article provide sufficient evidence to argue two key points. Firstly, they invite closer interrogation of donor/NGO claims that development projects are conducted with the active and meaningful participation of communities. Our data illustrate that participation may be hampered by the complexity of translating development discourse, home to Anglophone buzzwords, into different local languages and cultures. It also suggests that not recognising and addressing the importance of languages and the centrality of translation and interpreting in development increases the risk of failed project outcomes. The findings thus illustrate the need for development practitioners to take into account language needs in project planning and for current research in Development Studies to include aspects of translation and multilingualism in their analysis of project delivery and NGO-community relations.

Secondly, the foregoing analysis makes an important contribution to Translation and Interpreting Studies (T&IS). It has revealed the critical role that multilingual NGO workers play in negotiating the meaning and goals of international development projects. While the dominant narrative in T&IS has been constructed around notions of professional practice, the data in this article in fact reveal that working with professional linguists may not always lead to the best outcomes in the context of development. In both case studies, respondents argued that professional translators and interpreters generally lacked the necessary background in development to be able to produce qualitative translations that would be understandable to the target audience. Furthermore, the importance of local embeddedness was raised by respondents in both countries, and particularly in Malawi, where working with a local interpreter was considered as critical in establishing relationships of trust with local communities, which are vital for development projects to be successful. These findings thus destabilise Western notions of professionalism that lie at the very roots of the disciplines of Translation and Interpreting Studies, which were established after the introduction of academic training programmes (Marais 2014; Tymoczko 2006). They indicate the necessity for T&IS to engage more fully with translation phenomena in non-Western societies, forcing scholars to rethink some of the Western key concepts and understandings (Marais & Delgado Luchner 2019). Finally, the findings indicate that translation and interpreting research can make an important interdisciplinary contribution to areas as Development Studies and International Relations by drawing more attention to the centrality of translation as a social phenomenon, which will help researchers and practitioners understand why development efforts may or may not be successful. In order to do so, however, T&IS needs to make a conscious effort to engage with contexts in which translation and interpreting may seem absent or marginal at first sight because of their informal and ad-hoc nature.

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