Emergency Language Services in the China-Myanmar Borderland: A Case of Multilingual Translation Center at Mengding

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Abstract

Emergency language services (ELS) have gained increasing importance in China. Given the shifting multilingual profile in Yunnan, it is of great significance to investigate how language facilitates the access of linguistic minorities to public health information and other key messages in times of crisis. Based on the fieldwork conducted in January 2024 in Mengding, this study examines how a Translation and Interpreting Association (TIA) offers ELS in China’s border town. The findings indicate that both foreign languages and cross-border ethnic groups’ languages are frequently needed for crisis translation and interpreting. In particular, Myanmar is the most frequently needed foreign language, followed by Thai and English, and two cross-border ethnic groups’ languages (Tai and Kokang) are also needed for crisis communication. The findings also reveal that TIA acts as a language broker for offering non-standard Myanmar translation and interpreting services for various crisis events including the COVID-19 pandemic, mitigating border conflicts, and participating in different types of public health emergencies. Based on the findings, it is suggested that effective emergency translation and interpreting services at China’s border towns should take into consideration the multilingual profiles of border migrants of diverse backgrounds. This study can shed lights on emergency language policy and planning in China’s border provinces.

Keywords: ELS, TIA, linguistic minorities, public emergencies, China-Myanmar Borderland

1. Introduction

Language plays a key role in facilitating access to public health information for linguistic minorities across the globe (Li et al., 2023; Piller et al., 2020). In the era of the early 2020s, the world faced unprecedented challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc globally, underscoring the indispensable role of language in times of crisis. The pandemic shows the stark disparities in access to health information, particularly for linguistic minorities. Amidst this backdrop, the importance of language in emergency responses became evident as many among the world’s diverse linguistic communities struggled to obtain essential information about healthcare, preventative measures, and available support services.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese sociolinguists (Li & Rao, 2020; Qu, 2020; Wang et al., 2020) have actively participated in the fight against the crisis and developed ELS as an indigenous concept to guide the language policy and planning for the multilingual population in China. The emergence of ELS illustrates the critical need for bridging the communication gap and ensuring that no one is left behind during crises. Some linguists also believe that language plays an important role in times of crisis.

ELS are particularly important in China’s border provinces where an increasing number of foreign migrants crossing the border and working and living in China. There are nine border provinces in China sharing the borderline with 14 neighboring countries. With the advancement of the “Belt and Road” initiative, border provinces have become gateways through which a large number of people from neighboring countries enter Chinese border cities. However, the vast majority of these foreign nationals do not understand Mandarin or Chinese characters, a situation that is particularly evident in Yunnan (Li & Zhang, 2020). Li and Zhang (2020) noted that the Yunnan border region has a large cross-border population, with many Myanmar entering Yunnan for business and work, typically in low-skill manual labor, leading to high mobility and dispersed living, with limited abilities in speaking and understanding Mandarin.
In the border areas, various non-governmental forces serve as crucial brokers for communication for linguistic minorities. For example, universities and traditional media have harnessed strengths to provide language services in times of crisis (Li & Zhang, 2021). Among these, TIAs also play a significant role. However, we know very little about how local TIAs contribute to crisis communication. To better understand how language facilitates linguistic minorities’ access to public health resources, this study aims to examine the ELS delivered by a multilingual translation and interpreting center at Mengding, a Chinese border town between China and Myanmar.

2. Literature Review

2.1 ELS in China

During critical moments, multilingual populations often become vulnerable due to linguistic barriers. It is particularly crucial to offer relevant ELS to overcome these communication obstacles (Uekusa, 2019). Wang (2020) discussed the essential role of rapidly mobilizing and using language resources in emergencies, which not only facilitates the immediate dissemination of critical information but also significantly enhances the effectiveness of public health responses, proving crucial in overcoming linguistic barriers that might otherwise impede effective crisis management. Li Yan (2021) emphasized that language serves a vital role in managing and controlling public health crises, stressing the importance of improving national linguistic capabilities, optimizing the effectiveness of emergency language responses, and developing strong language emergency mechanisms in public crises. By improving language access, the efficacy of emergency responses and public health strategies can be enhanced, ultimately leading to more equitable health achievements across diverse linguistic contexts.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of offering language services to linguistic minorities has been widely acknowledged (Li et al., 2023; Piller et al., 2020). Since 2020, Chinese sociolinguistic scholars have actively engaged in developing the concept of ELS and adopting this concept to serve different linguistic communities.

Regarding the definition of ELS, there is no universal agreement, but Wang’s version tends to be frequently cited. Wang et al. (2020) suggested ELS as a crucial and comprehensive system within the broader field of language services, encompassing rapid product delivery, technological deployment, and active involvement in linguistic rescue during significant disasters or public crises. This framework emphasizes the integration of diverse language services, including infrastructure, planning, standards, competencies, and talent, highlighting its essential role in addressing and managing emergencies effectively. ELS capacity involves the strategic utilization of linguistic resources and expertise by the state during crises, which is crucial for effective emergency responses, ensuring the flow of information, maintaining social stability, and enhancing the nation’s image (Teng, 2020). Li Yuming (2021) posited that ELS are specialized language services utilized for sudden public incidents, with emergency and suddenness being two key characteristics.

The emergence of ELS has been closely associated with China’s historical and socioeconomic development. The concept of 语言服务, namely language services, was first studied in China by Qu (2007). Qu (2007) researched the concept of language services from three aspects: disciplinary classification, basic attributes, and basic types. Li (2010) differentiated the agents and objectives of language services from macro and micro perspectives. The language services industry in China originated during the Reform and Opening-up period, developed in the 1990s, and flourished in the 21st century. The combined forces of globalization and technological advancement, government and private sector demand, and educational development have collectively propelled the prosperous growth of China’s language services industry (Guo, 2010). In particular, large-scale international events such as the Beijing Olympics, Shanghai World Expo, and Guangzhou Asian Games have put forward higher requirements for language services.

With the transformation of China’s social economy and the improvement of comprehensive national strength, research on ELS has been put on the agenda. The importance of ELS first became apparent during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and the 2010 Yushu earthquake. Both Wenchuan and Yushu are multilingual areas, where language barriers can hinder the efficiency of post-disaster rescue efforts. In Yushu, for example, the majority of the area’s population is Tibetan, and the number of Tibetan speakers is extremely high, which makes rescue work difficult (Li & Rao, 2020).

In 2012, the establishment of ELS to provide linguistic services under sudden conditions was proposed (Ministry of Education, 2012). In 2016, as part of the “13th Five-Year” plan, the cultivation of emergency language service personnel and the enhancement of foreign language offerings in universities to improve the nation’s capacity for ELS was recommended (Ministry of Education, 2016). This indicates that the Chinese government recognized the crucial role of ELS in handling public emergencies.
During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, ELS attracted widespread attention in China and has been recognized as part of the legitimate components of China’s emergency management system. As argued by Li et al. (2023), ELS works as a collaborative agency mobilizing resources ranging from the government, academic experts, and civilian volunteers and making significant contributions to the fight against the pandemic.

In early 2020, under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, “战疫语言服务团” (Fighting Against Epidemic Language Service Corps) was established (Ministry of Education, 2020a). The corps assisted medical teams from other regions in overcoming dialect barriers in doctor-patient communication, thereby supporting Hubei province in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, the corps in collaboration with various universities and institutions, developed a series of emergency language service products including 《抗击疫情湖北方言通》 (Fighting Against COVID-19 Epidemic in Hubei Fangyuan) providing multidimensional language services for medical personnel and related groups fighting the pandemic in Hubei and served as a reference for other cities in China, Ministry of Education, 2020a), 《疫情防控外国语通》 (A Guide to the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Epidemic in Foreign Languages) been created in response to the increasingly severe pandemic situation abroad, offering language services related to pandemic prevention and treatment for international students and foreign nationals in China, and also communicated China’s anti-pandemic experience internationally, Ministry of Education, 2020b) and 《疫情防控“简明汉语”》 (A Guide to the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Epidemic in ‘Plain Chinese’ been developed to better convey information about COVID-19 to foreign nationals in China using clear and concise Chinese, and to enhance the effectiveness of pandemic prevention and control, Ministry of Education, 2020c).

Li et al. (2021) mentioned that the “Fighting Against Epidemic Language Service Corps” was a successful attempt at China’s ELS. ELS was the first nationwide, interdisciplinary emergency language service in China that involved a collaboration between civil society and government, achieving excellent results. In light of the crucial role of ELS in pandemic prevention and control, the State Council (2020) proposed the establishment of an emergency language service system to strengthen the nation’s capacity in this area. During the “14th Five-Year” national emergency system planning, the State Council (2021) emphasized the importance of cultivating professional emergency language service personnel and forming systematic, professional teams. By April 2022, the National Language Service Corps of China was officially established in Beijing to provide language services for various types of sudden public incidents, indicating that the construction of China’s ELS has entered a new era of systematization and standardization (Ministry of Education, 2022).

After COVID-19, relevant ELS studies have been emerging. Deng (2023) offered a detailed examination of the strategies and frameworks involved in assessing national emergency language capabilities. Specifically, it discusses the creation of an evaluation system for ELS capabilities, focusing on cities as assessment units. On the construction of emergency language signs and slogans in urban China, Li and Li (2023) emphasized the critical role of emergency language signage in enhancing public safety and communication during crises. They argued that the diverse linguistic needs of urban populations, particularly in multilingual and multicultural cities, necessitate robust, clear, and accessible emergency language signs. In the context of ELS within China, Guo (2023) examined the specific needs and models of ELS in ethnic minority villages on the border, using Tianpeng Town in Yunnan as a case study.

In sum, ELS has been recognized as a useful concept to facilitate the access of linguistic minorities to public health information. Despite having an increasing number of studies on ELS in China, we know very little about how multilingual translation and interpreting centers/associations contribute to crisis communication.

2.2 Multilingual Profile in Yunnan

Since China became the world’s second-largest economy, China’s border provinces have emerged as critical junctures connecting China with neighboring countries. Yunnan, Southwest of China, is such as case in point.

In the contemporary context, Yunnan has acquired strategic geographical positioning due to its demographic importance. According to the Seventh National Population Census, Yunnan hosts approximately 380,000 foreign nationals, ranking it second in the nation for its foreign population size (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This influx is reflective of broader trends impacting border regions where substantial cross-border interactions occur.

Yunnan is located in southwestern China shares borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, and has many ports posted on the borderline (see Figure 1), facilitating a vibrant exchange of goods, cultures, and languages. Using the 2018 main data for ports of entry and exit in Yunnan as an example, the total number of entering and exiting was approximately 45.84 million, of which about 28.64 million were from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, with Myanmar accounting for about 23.9 million, making up 79% of the foreign entering and exiting (China
Association of Port-of-Entry, 2019, p. 598). These ports serve as conduits not only for trade but also for cultural and linguistic exchange, making Yunnan a melting pot of languages and ethnicities. This demographic and economic backdrop sets the stage for a dynamic multilingual environment, wherein the constant flow of diverse populations necessitates robust systems for language services. The presence of such a large and diverse foreign population underscores the need for effective communication strategies.

Figure 1. Yunnan’s land-ports in blue dots

In addition to the foreign migrants from neighboring countries, Yunnan’s multilingual demography includes 25 indigenous ethnic minorities (Publishing House of Yunnan Yearbook, 2022, p. 153). Along both sides of the China-Myanmar border, residents are predominantly from these ethnic minorities, with over 30 cross-border ethnic groups identified (Lu, 2006). Additionally, the linguistic backgrounds of the Myanmar laborers in border cities are diverse. Taking Ruili as an example, there are Myanmar individuals who only speak local ethnic minority languages or Chinese, and there are those who only speak Myanmar (Li & Zhang, 2020).

Given the important geopolitical position of Yunnan, it is of significance to explore how language facilitates the social inclusion of multilingual populations. Based on fieldwork conducted at Qingshuihe, one of the national land ports on the China-Myanmar border, this study selected a translation and interpreting center for study to explore how the language center facilitates access to public information of different multilingual populations living and working in China.

3. Methodology

3.1 Selection of Research Site

This study belongs to a large ethnography conducted in the China-Myanmar-Laos-Vietnam borderlands¹. In this study, Mengding TIA was chosen as the research site to explore the ELS in the China-Myanmar borderland for the following three reasons:

TIA is located in Mengding, as a national-level land port (Qingshuihe Port) at China’s border, which is a critical juncture for the congregation of Myanmar and a vibrant hub for cross-border interactions. Mengding is not only a gathering place for the Dai ethnic group but also lies close to Lincang in Yunnan province and Kokang in Myanmar, thereby positioning it as a key node in the web of regional trade and cultural exchange. The inclusion of a geographic map (see Figure 2) of the research site can indicate visually Mengding’s strategic location in the China-Myanmar borderland and its nearness to the Kokang region.

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A second reason for selecting (TIA) is associated with the fact that TIA has been at the forefront of providing translation and interpreting services during numerous public health emergencies. This wealth of experience not only showcases the association’s capability to respond swiftly and effectively in times of crisis but also offers a rich repository of practices and lessons that are invaluable for understanding the challenges and strategies in ELS.

The association is home to a diverse array of multilingual talents proficient in a variety of languages, including but not limited to Myanmar, Tai, English, and a spectrum of Chinese dialects prevalent in border areas, such as the Kokang dialect. This linguistic diversity within the TIA provides a unique opportunity to study multilingual communication and translation in a region characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity.

To sum up, by studying Mengding TIA, it is possible to engage deeply with the nuances of language service provision in emergency contexts, under the backdrop of a linguistically and culturally complex borderland. The association’s strategic location, its proven action in ELS, and its rich linguistic fabric make it an ideal site for investigating the provision of emergency translation and interpreting services.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

During January 21-22, 2024, at Mengding TIA, we interviewed the president of the association for a total of two hours, taking 21 permissible photographs (linguistic landscapes) inside the association, and obtaining PDF files of AIDS training and guidance on prevention of COVID-19 for Myanmar. During the fieldwork, we recorded the interview with the president of the association through notes and organized the pictures we took and the observations we made inside the association.

Content analysis was used for mapping out the themes on ELS. Content analysis was proposed by Holsti as “any technique for making inference by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (1969, p. 14). In multilingual research, content analysis is one of the commonly used analytical methods, and many scholars (Gu, 2011; Gu & Paktin, 2013; Hidalgo, 1995; Li, 2017) have employed this technique. This study employs content analysis to investigate “how does TIA function during public emergencies?” By collecting key constructs from the internet and organizing research notes, we identified several themes such as “TIA has many multilingual talents”, “Myanmar can also work in TIA”, “TIA promotes international friendship”, and “TIA is not profitable”. Subsequently, we determined the categories relevant to the interconnection between TIA and public emergencies, including “TIA’s role as volunteers in public emergencies”, “TIA’s compliance with government arrangements during public emergencies”, and “TIA’s protection of small language-speaking groups during public emergencies”. Finally, based on the concept of “ELS”, we further developed these categories into: “TIA is an important supplement to ELS”, “TIA holds significant importance for ELS”, and “TIA improves the quality and efficiency of translation in ELS to deal with various emergencies”.

Firstly, because of the limited time and energy, we can only focus on the TIA in Mengding, many other organizations have been involved in the translation of public emergencies for hospitals, and public security. These institutions are worth further exploring in future research; secondly, because of my inaccessibility, I did
not have a chance to communicate with Myanmar personnel working for the translation association.

4. Findings

4.1 Offering Emergency Multilingual Services

In a border town like Mengding, multilingual services constitute a necessity for facilitating emergency services. Mengding TIA has provided multilingual services on various occasions with different functions. Languages including Myanmar, English, Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer are available, reflecting the diverse linguistic landscape of the border region and the transnational flows of people and information that characterize the China-Myanmar border.

The multilingual services can be manifested in the photographic evidence (see the following Figure 3). Moreover, the TIA also developed its linguistic capabilities by including other ‘invisible’ languages, like Tai and Kokang for emergency services. Both Tai and Kokang are integral to the socio-cultural fabric of the region. These two languages, while perhaps less officially recognized, hold significant local importance. The inclusion of these languages in the TIA’s offerings is not merely a service but a commitment to the linguistic realities of the region’s populace, ensuring that linguistic minorities are not marginalized during critical times (see the detailed description in section 4.2.1).

![Figure 3. TIA’s charges for language services](image1)

The Tai language/script is widely used in Mengding. For instance, the Tai script becomes an ideal choice for communicating with Myanmar migrants of Dai background. This can be confirmed in the following Figure 4. Figure 4 substantiates the active use and demand for the Tai language. Road signs how far it is from Mengding to ‘Beijing’, ‘Kunming’ and ‘Lincang’ not only in Chinese but also in Tai (Myanmar Tai) reveal the prevalence of the Tai-speaking community in the area, and many Myanmar in Mengding have a Dai background.

![Figure 4. Bilingual road signs in Chinese and Tai](image2)
This multilingual signage is not simply functional in terms of informing Myanmarese migrants of Dai background but also serves as a visual testament to the importance of the Tai language in local life. The necessity of including the Tai language as part of emergency response is also reported in section 4.3.

Different from China’s metropolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, Mengding does not need English, Japanese, Korean, or any other European languages to serve ELS. Instead, the multilingual translation services listed above go beyond the major global languages, which indicates the real needs of language services in accordance with the Mending’s local and foreign inhabitants. The TIA’s offering of translation services ensures that all members of the community, irrespective of linguistic ethnic, and national backgrounds, have equal access to essential information and services both daily or during crises. By incorporating Tai and Kokang into their language services, the TIA is effectively responding to the unique challenges posed by the multilingual and multicultural context of the China-Myanmar borderland.

4.2 Acting as Language Mediator for Various Institutions

Border towns are different from the central part of China in terms of crises. The COVID-19 pandemic does cause a huge problem for social communication, but other types of crises often occur in the borderlands, which are very much non-existent in the central part of China. In various emergency services, Mengding TIA has established itself as a vital language mediator for various institutions. This section delineates the scope and significance of the TIA's contributions during public emergencies.

Participating in the Fight of COVID-19 at Qingshuihe Port

Mengding TIA sent many translators and interpreters to support the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic together with medical workers and policemen at Qingshuihe land port. The translation volunteers undertook critical tasks for testing the COVID-19 virus and organizing vaccination campaigns. According to the interview with the president of TIA, the volunteer translators operated as brokers in facilitating the communication between Myanmar migrants and Chinese staff. Such voluntary conduct was essential for ensuring that health information was spread effectively and that individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds could access necessary medical services without impediment.

Delivering Public Health Lectures in Myanmar and Putonghua

Different types of crises can occur at Mending. Mengding TIA has been actively engaged in delivering public health lectures in Myanmar and Putonghua. For example, the TIA extended its language services to the realm of public health by translating lectures aimed at curbing the spread of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19 and AIDS, in the border areas. Screenshots from these translated parts (see Figures 5 & 6) serve as evidence of the TIA's engagement with health issues at the border. By translating these crucial public health messages, the TIA has been instrumental in disseminating life-saving information across linguistic divides, thereby empowering the locals to combat public health challenges.

Figure 5. Bilingual guidance on prevention of COVID-19 for Myanmar
Assisting Public Security and Conflicts

Mengding TIA has been indispensable in assisting the public security forces in interrogating and solving drug trafficking cases. Such linguistic assistance has been crucial in the efforts to combat illegal activities and maintain the rule of law.

Furthermore, during wartime, the TIA’s services have been essential in mitigating the conflicts between Kokang soldiers and Myanmar government forces. Whenever there is a war in Myanmar between ethnic armed forces and Myanmar’s central government, China’s border towns are flooded with injured soldiers. Despite China’s good intention to save Myanmar soldiers, there might be conflicts when Myanmar soldiers of different political backgrounds are allocated together in the same hospital. For instance, Kokang-speaking soldiers and Burma soldiers were once living together at a Chinese hospital. Mending TIA successfully mitigated an accident when translators heard what Kokang soldiers communicated with their peers as demonstrated in the following interview.

In 2009, during the conflict between the Myanmar government forces and the local Kokang militia, Mengding Hospital admitted around ten wounded soldiers from both Kokang and Myanmar. They were housed together. The Kokang soldiers were overheard discussing in the Kokang language about “killing these Bamar soldiers tonight,” which the Myanmar soldiers did not understand. Locals who overheard the conversation promptly reported it to the authorities, thereby preventing a bloody incident and keeping China from becoming involved (Mending TIA’s President, January 22, 2024).

In sum, Mengding TIA’s offer of ELS highlights its role as a language mediator in times of crisis. Additionally, the TIA’s work goes beyond mere translation; it is a form of linguistic advocacy that ensures equitable access to language services.

4.3 Diversifying Translation and Interpreting (T&I) Services in the China-Myanmar Borderland

Delivering successful T&I emergency services in the China-Myanmar borderland requires a diversifying approach. This can be manifested in three aspects.

First, doing emergency T&I services requires the capacity to understand a variety of Myanmar languages including both standard varieties and non-standard varieties. The adaptation to various accents or language varieties is a crucial aspect of T&I services in the borderland. However, such capacity is not cultivated at Chinese universities where it is the standard variety that has been chosen to teach and learn. The limited knowledge of Myanmar language varieties has caused some problems when it comes to delivering ELS in the
borderlands.

As reported by the President of Mengding TIA in the interview, Myanmar has over 70 types of Myanmar varieties, each with its distinct phonetic features. The ability to master Myanmar varieties is essential for effective communication and service provision in Mengding given that the majority of Myanmar migrants speak the Myanmar language with different accents.

Apart from the capacity to understand different Myanmar varieties for emergency T&I services, understanding ‘non-standard’ Chinese varieties is a must in Mending. The Kokang language, also called Mengding Fangyan, is one of the Chinese varieties. Kokang people from Myanmar speak the Kokang language. The capacity to understand/speak the Kokang language is important for China’s border drug enforcement. In other words, it is not sufficient to speak either standard Chinese or standard Myanmar for translating or interpreting tasks required by public security departments in border areas (field notes by the remarks of Mengding TIA's President, January 22, 2024). Therefore, T&I services also include delivering ‘non-standard’ language varieties as indicated below.

A Kokang woman, caught with 23 kilograms of drugs in Liuzhou, Guangxi, claimed she could neither speak nor understand Chinese or Myanmar, but only the Kokang language. This posed a challenge as the case was a significant drug-related issue requiring a qualified translator or a translation association. Since Kokang is not an officially recognized language, no translators were certified in it, complicating matters for the Guangxi Public Security Bureau. After inquiries, they contacted Mengding TIA, a certified body, to send a specialist to Liuzhou to assist in cracking the case (Mengding TIA's President, January 22, 2024).

As Liu and Zhang (2024) note, current ELS in China predominantly focus on foreign languages and offer a limited range of these during disasters and considering that China is not a primary immigrant destination but hosts a vast diversity of ethnic minorities with unique Fangyan, there is a significant need to enhance the focus on ethnic languages and Fangyan to ensure effective communication during emergencies.

Providing ELS that only offer dominant languages/variety such as English or standard Chinese, is no longer sufficient for the complex multilingual demography of the border areas. Mending, the population of the Dai ethnic group and a hub for Myanmar individuals of Dai background working across the border exemplifies the linguistic diversity of the borderland. Mengding TIA offers a variety of T&I services, incorporating minority languages (such as Tai language) and ‘non-standard’ Chinese varieties (such as Kokang Fangyan) into their language services, achieving good results in border ELS. The inclusion of those languages and varieties in the language database or translation capabilities of the TAC is significant. Such inclusion ensures that T&I services are equipped to meet the varied and specific needs of the local and cross-border populations, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of language emergency services in times of crisis.

To sum up, Mengding TIA presents a model of T&I service that is responsive to the complexities and challenges of operating in a multilingual and multicultural borderland. This approach not only facilitates effective communication and service delivery but also underscores the importance of linguistic adaptability in fostering a responsive and resilient emergency service framework in border areas.

5. Conclusion

ELS has gained an increasing importance in China. Given the shifting multilingual profile in Yunnan, it is of great significance to investigate how language facilitates the access of linguistic minorities to public health information and other key messages in times of crisis. Based on the fieldwork conducted in January 2024 in Mengding, this study examines how a TIA offers ELS at China’s border town. The findings indicate that both foreign languages and cross-border ethnic groups’ languages are frequently needed for crisis translation and interpreting. In particular, Myanmar is the most frequently needed foreign language, followed by Thai and English, and two cross-border ethnic groups’ languages (Tai and Kokang) are also needed for crisis communication. The findings also reveal that TIA acts as a language broker for offering non-standard Myanmar translation and interpreting services for various crisis events including the COVID-19 pandemic, mitigating
border conflicts, and participating in different types of public health emergencies. Based on the findings, it is suggested that effective emergency translation and interpreting services at China’s border towns should take into consideration the multilingual profiles of border migrants of diverse backgrounds. This study can shed light on emergency language policy and planning in China’s border provinces.

This study contributes to the research on ELS in China and fills a gap in domestic studies on the ELS of TIAs. The findings of this study enrich the diversity of languages used in emergency services and put forward new requirements for the use of non-standard languages, particularly in coordinating critical departments such as hospitals and public security in border areas. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of local minority languages and Fangyan. Providing corresponding language services is essential for the effective implementation of emergency services, which helps linguistically disadvantaged groups access vital information during emergencies. How to better promote the experience of ELS of the Mengding TIA and advance the study of ELS in China deserves further investigation.

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