

# Emergency Language Services in a Zhuang Village in the China-and-Vietnam Borderland

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## Abstract

As a localized sociolinguistic concept, emergency language services (ELS) have gained an increasing importance during the Covid-19 pandemic in China. Despite the nation-wide promotion of ELS, previous studies seem to center on the language practices in the cosmopolitan cities whereas our knowledge about the peripheral regions remains poorly understood. Given that China has the largest number of bordering countries, it is of significance to conduct ELS in the borderlands. Adopting ELS (Li, Rao, Zhang, & Li, 2020) as a theoretical framework, this study investigates what ELS have been available to a Zhuang-centered minority village in Yunnan bordering Vietnam and how local people respond to the Covid-19 related messages. Based on the semi-structured interviews with two village chiefs, one rural Zhuang doctor and six Zhuang people of different ages and language backgrounds, the study finds that there are insufficient language services available to Zhuang people who are lack of proficiency in Putonghua. The grassroots efforts yet play critical roles, including rural Zhuang doctor who provides emotional support and medical treatment, and village chiefs working as language broker translating Putonghua-mediated messages into Zhuang oral language through the multiple social media. The findings and results of the study can shed lights on providing effective language services for Chinese multilingual population from peripheral regions.

**Keywords:** emergency language services, Zhuang people, China-and-Vietnam borderlands, Covid-19

## 1. Introduction

“Global public health communication is characterized by the large-scale exclusion of linguistic minorities from timely high-quality information” (Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020). In a time of crisis, the person with the most information has the most capital. However, language minorities are excluded from information because they are not familiar with national language. They do not have access to up-to-date, effective, and high-quality information to protect and save themselves and others. Multilingualism becomes necessary in times of crisis so that, when crisis strikes, the safety of all people can be guaranteed to some extent. Multilingualism in China’s public sphere has raptured attention from the public shortly after the coronavirus was officially confirmed on 20th of January 2020 (Li, 2020). The fact that the multilingualism is valued by the state is proof of the significance of the multilingualism in a time of crisis, and the urgency of establishing the multilingualism in China. China has made great efforts into mobilizing mass participation in health communication via delivering timely multilingual information, which is “critical to the success of prevention and containment efforts” (Piller, 2020). However, little is known about how emergency language services have been conducted in Zhuang-centered minority regions.

The paper will adopt Emergency Language Services as the theoretical framework and dissect Language-related challenges confronting ethnic minority villagers. At the same time, the research content will center on two research questions how Zhuang people do and react based on the fact that they are less educated and have poor proficiency in Putonghua or Han dialect get access to public health information during the Covid-19 pandemic and how village chiefs and a Zhuang village doctor play important roles as language brokers translating Putonghua-mediated messages into Zhuang oral language through the multiple social media. Through investigation and study of the data, Zhuang oracy via loudspeakers constitutes an effective mode and medium, and using modal words for disseminating official policy helps build solidarity and trust among Zhuang villagers. Besides, Clappers in Zhuang become a localized practice for highlighting the emergency of situation and constructing the national loyalty towards the government and national language is substituted by oral ethnic

minority languages in gathering regions of ethnic minorities to provide better medical services and emotional support. The results of the paper are expected to be helpful in times of crisis for ethnic minority groups or vulnerable groups in other countries and regions when they need accesses to information.

## **2. Emergency Language Services and Language-Related Challenges Confronting Ethnic Minority Villagers in a Zhuang Village**

### *2.1 Emergency Language Services*

Emergency language services acting as one of parts of language services is a whole system which includes Emergency language infrastructure, emergency language planning, emergency language standards, emergency language competence, emergency language personnels and emergency language discipline, et al. (Wang, Ren, Sun, & Meng, 2020). Since COVID-19 was officially confirmed in 2020, language service volunteer organizations have been set up in many places, and dialect manuals have been compiled in succession. In this Zhuang Village in the China-and-Vietnam Borderland, the author notes that villager chiefs acting as a language intermediary, is one of the important emergency languages personnels. Additionally, during the epidemic control period, folk art and traditional media were, in a sense, used as an indirect infrastructure to provide language services. In China, in an emergency, the types of language can include the standard national language or Putonghua, Chinese varieties, minority languages, major foreign languages, cross-border languages, and sign language (Li et L., 2020). Putonghua, as the national language, covers all areas of life, including the medical field, which is very critical in times of crisis. Zhuang language is one of the minority languages. As one of the emergency language, Zhuang language played an important role in the doctor-patient communication during epidemic prevention. Emergency language services mainly concern three tasks: the provision of information, comfort, and monitoring. (Li et al., 2020). Village leaders, traditional media, folk art, and village doctors speaking Zhuang language all provided Zhuang people with accesses to up-to-date, effective, and high-quality information, emotional comfort.

### *2.2 Zhuang Villagers Lacked Access to Effective and the Latest Information*

Due to their poor proficiency in Putonghua or Han dialect, they were unable to acquire effectively information when information was transmitted in Putonghua or Han dialect. However, they were surrounded by information transmitted in Putonghua (national language) or Han dialect. The villagers' overall level of Mandarin was below the average level, and the education level of villagers in the group over thirty years old showed a downward trend. Besides, in this village on usual days, the elderly and children accounted for most of the residents. They belonged to the language minority groups and were in a marginal position in terms of information acquisition. Furthermore, most information was transmitted through modern mass media such as WeChat, Tik Tok, Weibo, TV, websites, etc., which had become a big challenge for the old Zhuang villagers when they needed to acquire information. As for children, they had less opportunities and less initiative to contact effective information on epidemic prevention and control. Through investigating and interview, there was a fact in the village that children had the following characteristics when it came to getting information: they seldom paid attention to official news announcements, and they tended to use mobile phones for entertainment; owing to the age limit, they didn't have their own ID card (they had an ID number when they were born but didn't have ID card) and their mobile phone functions would be limited in some ways; the mobile phones they used belonged to the elders, and the elders stipulated the time for them to use and children were more willing to play games in the limited time. They had less opportunities and less initiative to contact with effective epidemic prevention and control information.

During the epidemic, Zhuang villagers, as one of the language minority groups, felt depressed and sometimes they felt confused and anxious. They suffered from pressures in terms of the economic, work, academic, and from negative emotions caused by the Covid-19 epidemic. For them, the modern mass media brought "cold" news. Almost all information was transmitted in Putonghua or Han dialect—the language that they were not familiar with too much carrying the information content they needed to know most at that time. To a certain extent, they were excluded from critical information, which made them feel lost and lonely. Furthermore, the content disseminated by these modern mass media came from far away, rather than from places close to the villagers themselves. They felt that it lacked a certain degree of affinity, which made they feel unfamiliar in some ways.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Zhuang Villagers' Response to Language-Related Challenges During COVID-19*

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with six Zhuang villagers of different ages, language

backgrounds and educational backgrounds, and found that they showed significantly different responses to COVID-19. The more educated Zhuang villagers were, the more likely they were to choose more modern social media. The older Zhuang villagers were, the more likely they were to choose more traditional media (such as loudspeakers). However, both young and old people had encountered with difficulties and challenges to varying degrees. The following table is the family background of the six villagers interviewed:

Table 1. The basis information of Zhuang interviewees with different backgrounds

Participants	Age	Gender	Degree of education	The first language	The second language
P1	70	Male	The 5th grader	Zhuang language without literacy	Putonghua: average Han dialect: good
P2	70	Female	The 1st grader	Zhuang language without literacy	Putonghua: poor Han dialect: average
P3	58	Female	The 5th grader	Zhuang language without literacy	Putonghua: good Han dialect: good
P4	57	Female	Uneducated	Zhuang language without literacy	Putonghua: poor Han dialect: average
P5	23	Female	The 2nd postgraduate	Zhuang language	Putonghua: good Han dialect: good
P6	18	Male	The 1st grade in junior college	Zhuang language without literacy	Putonghua: good Han dialect: good

Table 2. The choices' order of Zhuang interviewees

Participants	Their choices (in the order from the most helpful to the least helpful)
P1	TV, loudspeaker, fellow villagers
P2	Loudspeaker, TV, fellow villagers
P3	Tik Tok, loudspeaker, fellow villagers, TV
P4	Tik Tok, loudspeaker, fellow villagers, TV
P5	Tik Tok, WeChat, QQ, loudspeaker, fellow villagers
P6	Tik Tok, WeChat, QQ, loudspeaker, fellow villagers

P2, one of the oldest interviewees, gave priority to the village loudspeaker when choosing media. When P2 was a child, she received only the first grade of primary school education. She said that her educational experience was equivalent to no education because she could not remember anything taught. P2 had poor proficiency in Mandarin. "When TV speakers speak slowly, I can understand about half of content, but when they speak too fast or when there are some technical terms, I can hardly understand", she said. When the author further asked P2 whether she had some difficulties in listening to the loudspeaker in the village, P2 said, "due to my old age, my hearing is not very good. Sometimes I cannot hear the voice from the loudspeaker clearly when sitting in the house". Then the village chief would play a song for two to three minutes before broadcasting something, and villagers knew when they heard the song that it was going to announce something. Villagers would go outside and listen carefully, and from then on, they rarely missed information from the loudspeaker. Through the interview, the author learned that P2 relied on the loudspeaker and asked P3 for help sometimes during Covid-19 because P3 could use WeChat and had a nephew who worked in the hospital.

Different from P2, P6 was the youngest one among all interviewees. Like other young people at this age, P6 was more likely to choose popular mass media used by most young people for access to information. For him, information provided by these mass media was convenient, complete and up to date. However, P6 still encountered setbacks when he took advantage of popular mass media to obtain comprehensive and up-to-date information. During severe epidemic, he often suffered from negative emotions while staying at home. Although information he got was available, comprehensive, it lacked temperature in some ways for him. Sometimes he felt that the virus was close to him, but sometimes he felt it was far away. In addition, the village he leaved in was in the southwest border area of the country. When there was the threat of the virus, he sometimes felt depressed, confused and anxious about his future. P6 said it was the village loudspeaker that saved him from emotional problems. The loudspeaker in the village made him feel alert, and he then actually realized that the virus was close to him. Through the loudspeaker, he heard the voice of the chief of the village. It was this kind of voice that made him feel the cohesion of villagers and the efforts of the grassroots. Slowly, this voice removed his negative mood. He found consolation, unity, trust in the country by listening to the loudspeaker. Moreover, P6 said that

the fact that the village chief had been through the village streets with a loud hailer reflected that the grassroots leaders were making great efforts and had done a good job of the task arranged by the upper leadership. He could feel the concern from the country's center for this border village, and sincerely appreciated government in his deep heart.

### 3.2 The Grassroots Efforts to Provide Emergency Language Services for Zhuang People

#### 3.2.1 Village Chiefs Acting as Language Brokers in Times of Crisis

In 2020, when the Covid-19 began to devastate this country, people in every place became nervous and began to prepare. As the last layer to implement the national tasks, the grass-roots institution was the crucial layer. Therefore, the village chief is the most important intermediary between the masses and the superior leadership and plays a pivotal role when fighting against Covid-19 pandemic.

During the interview with the village chief 1, the author learned that despite the cold weather as the Spring Festival approached, the village chief and the relevant village committee staffs would still lead the villagers to the key road junction of the village and persuade people coming from the outside and relevant vehicles to turn back from the village's key road, as shown in the picture below.



Figure 1. People in the key road junction during Covid-19 pandemic

When the author asked the village chief about the challenges and difficulties related to language, the village chief said, “during the Spring Festival, many people drove to visit their relatives and friends, and some disregarded the regulations.” He continued, “villagers didn't realize the seriousness of the Covid-19, and it took hours to persuade them”. In addition, village chief encountered with language difficulties when translating documents written in Chinese character. The village chief needed to effectively convey instructions of the upper leadership to each villager, and finished the tasks assigned to ensure the safety of each villager. However, the instructions were transmitted to the village chief in Putonghua or Han dialect, and the village chief needed to translate them into Zhuang language before he broadcast. As a result, for some new terms that appeared during the epidemic prevention period, the village chiefs spent great efforts to complete the task. The village chief mentioned some terms to the author, such as Omicron virus. Early in November 2021, the newly emerged super strain, omicron, was spreading rapidly with super infectiveness (Wang, Guo, & Liu, 2022). For such transliterated words, even though they were written in Chinese characters, the villagers did not have the ability to directly understand the meaning. The chief of the village wanted to make all villagers understand the characteristics of the virus, and said in Zhuang language, “this kind of virus is more severe than the previous ones, and you need to pay more attention and protect yourselves.” The village leader did not pronounce the name of the virus but referred to its feature. After hearing the explanation of the nature of the virus, the villagers gradually understood the meaning of the term and were willing to take corresponding protective measures according to the requirements of the village chief.

#### 3.2.2 A Rural Zhuang Doctor Providing Emotional Comfort and Medical Treatment

In December 2022, China issued the “新十条” (ten new measures) to optimize the prevention and control of the coronavirus. Since December 7, 2022, nucleic acid testing would no longer be carried out nationwide, and the travel code service would be offline. In the future, nucleic acid result and travel code would no longer be checked when people went to public places and took public transport. The isolation of infected persons was divided into the following two conditions: asymptomatic infected persons and mild cases didn't need special treatment, but generally need home isolation and strengthen health monitoring, or voluntary choice of centralized

isolation and treatment; serious cases were transferred to designated hospitals for treatment. To some extent, the new rules greatly facilitated people's life. However, everything had two sides. People followed the trend, and crazily grabbed lots of medicine, so that there were some people who were sick in need were unable to get medicine. In rural areas, the shortage of medical resources was even more severe. The village investigated by the author is remote, and the medical resources here are in severe shortage. The author was also infected with the virus at the end of December 2022. However, from another perspective, fortunately, the author became one of the patients to understand better the difficulties encountered by the patients in the village in the process of seeking medical treatment, and to understand the seriousness of the lack of local medical resources in this village.

The village doctor is a woman at the age of about 40. Villagers here usually see the doctor at the small clinic in the village run by the village doctor when they are sick. Since early December 2022, all COVID-19 patients, except those with severe cases, had been encouraged to treat themselves at home. Many medicines were not available online or in physical drug stores. After the Spring Festival in 2022, this village doctor was transferred to village B which was more than 3 kilometers away from the village the author investigated in. Zhuang villagers had to walk or drive to the village B, or to hospitals or pharmacies in towns and counties farther away. The distance and language challenges made it even more difficult for villagers to seek medical care.

However, in the interview with interviewees (P1, P2 and P3), the author learned that they were more willing to go to the clinic where the village doctor worked at. P2 told the author that she was not well-educated, and her Putonghua was poor, and her Han dialect was in average level. She was incapable of going to hospital in the town, unless accompanied by a literate person. P1 told the author that although he could read and his Han dialect was good, he was more willing to go to the village clinic for minor illnesses, because the village doctor spoke Zhuang language. He believed that a doctor who was able to speak the patient's own language would be more able to understand what patient was saying, and thus better understand his illness to give better prescriptions. Both P1 and P2 would choose the village doctor, which was a kind of emotional preference, because the doctor speaking Zhuang language gave them a sense of security, which was a kind of emotional comfort for them.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 Zhuang Oracy via Loudspeakers Constitutes an Effective Mode and Medium

In the information age, science and technology are developing constantly, and social media is emerging endlessly. But in a Zhuang village in the China-and-Vietnam borderland, loudspeaker as one of traditional mass media still plays a very important role.

Through talking with the village chief, the author learned that the loudspeaker in the village was used for some important announcements, and when there were some important festivals, such as the Spring Festival, it would play some Zhuang folk songs. As one member of this village, the author knew that the village chief would play a song for two to three minutes before announcing an important event, and then stopped playing the song to broadcast the important announcement. The following is a picture of the loudspeaker sent to me by the village chief through WeChat:



Figure 2. The loudspeaker in the village

The position of the loudspeaker in the picture has been circled in red color by the author. The broadcast was on the top floor of the village chief's house, which was located roughly in the middle of the village house, so that no one in the village would miss any important announcement.

For the elderly and low-educated Zhuang villagers like P2, loudspeaker was a very important channel to get

information. They only used non-smart phones and these phones' functions were limited to making and receiving calls. They didn't know what WeChat was or what Tik Tok was. P2's accesses to information mainly included television, fellow villagers and loudspeaker. P2 said that she would first choose the loudspeaker, then her fellow villagers, and finally television. P6 as a member of the young group, he would first choose modern mass media such as Tik Tok, WeChat and QQ, which were used by young people daily to get information, followed by loudspeaker, and finally, Zhuang people in the same village. However, for P6, loudspeaker was still an indispensable tool to obtain information, because for him, loudspeaker made up for the hole in his heart during the fight against the epidemic and made his heart warm.

#### 4.2 Using Modal Words for Disseminating Official Policy Helps Build Solidary and Trust Among Zhuang Villagers

The village chief recorded a 32-second audio clip for the author, in which the author made some new discoveries. The author found that in this just 32-second audio, the village chief used two modal words, one of which was used twice. The author uses International Phonetic for English to mark these modal words, they are /wa:/ and /ei/. As one of Zhuang villagers, the author knows well the listener groups and function of these two modal words.

The first modal word /wa:/, in the daily life of Zhuang villagers, its listener groups are children. When it comes to telling an important thing, it's not just for kids but for everyone. The use of this modal word makes the speaker have these following qualities: affinity, attracting people's attention, easier to be accepted. For the second modal word /ei/, there is no limit to its listener groups. All people can be listeners of this modal word. Usage of this modal word gives the speaker these qualities: sense of patience, sincerity, high reliability. It was precisely because of the function of "trust" owned by modal words that the villagers and village chiefs became more united in the fight against the epidemic.

Such modal words were used by village chiefs to convey information of official documents to villagers. Village chiefs chose modal according to the different functions of modal, combined with the content to be notified.

#### 4.3 Clappers in Zhuang Become a Localized Practice for Highlighting the Emergency of Situation and Constructing the National Loyalty Towards the Government

As one of the many ethnic minorities, Zhuang people also have their own ethnic features, such as Zhuang folk songs, Zhuang folk dances, and some folk arts such as Zhuang clappers. The author found that clappers was used in the fight against the epidemic. During the anti-epidemic period, the village head put forwarded short videos in oral Zhuang language to the village's WeChat group. The author transcribed the speech content of one video into Chinese characters and expressed the pronunciation of Zhuang language in International Phonetic for English, as shown in the picture below.



Figure 3. The transcribed speech content of the video

The Chinese characters are in clappers rhyme, and the author uses the same color to mark the same tone of the last character in each line. When the author tried to pronounce each line in Zhuang language and found that the Zhuang language also rhymed at the end. Similarly, the author has marked Zhuang pronunciation having the



same final tone with the same color, as can be clearly seen from the picture above.

Clappers as a kind of entertainment art suitable for all ages. When it is used as a carrier of important information, it has three functions: to relieve pressure; to be more intelligible; to be remembered easily. Because rhythm itself is very musical, the listener can relieve pressures to a certain extent after listening to it. What's more, due to its rhythm, the listener will remember the content in a short time after it is played many times. When the content is memorized, it helps the villagers understand the text further.

In addition, the content of clappers not only mentions the earnest responsibility and hard duty of medical staff, but also mentions the country and the Communist Party, cultivating patriotic sentiment. The clappers also says that local people do not be afraid and should believe in the central government (see the following picture). This content is very important as content for villages in the border areas of China. The security of border areas is of importance to national security. These contents help consolidate the unity of ethnic minorities along the border and strengthen people's patriotic feelings. A country is safe when its borders are secure.



Figure 4. Another transcribed speech content of the video

#### *4.4 National Language Is Substituted by Oral Ethnic Minority Languages in Gathering Regions of Ethnic Minorities to Provide Better Medical Services and Emotional Support*

The author went to the local village to interview the village doctor and learned that the language chosen by the village doctor when communicating with patients was Zhuang language. Moreover, the author also observed that the language on the walls of the clinic and all the bulletin boards in the room were written in Chinese characters, but the voices of patients and doctors were almost always Zhuang language. This invisible language is here to verbally replace Putonghua or national language. The following is a picture taken by the author of the village doctor giving injections to patients:



Figure 5. The village doctor giving injections to patients

The doctor talked to the patient in Zhuang language, and the patient described her condition to the doctor in Zhuang language. The invisible but audible marginalized language played an important role. Although Zhuang language cannot be seen, Zhuang language is also indispensable in the medical field in addition to the daily communication of Zhuang villagers. The use of Zhuang language made patients better understand what doctors said and doctors better understand patients' illness. At the same time, in addition to facilitating the communication between doctors and patients and providing better medical services for patients, the fact that doctors can speak Zhuang language makes patients feel safer psychologically. Compared with doctors who cannot speak Zhuang language, the villagers feel much less nervous when they communicate with doctors who

can speak Zhuang language, which improves their satisfaction with the services provided by the clinic or the hospital.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, the author interviewed Zhuang villagers, village chiefs and village doctors from different linguistic backgrounds in a Zhuang village in the China-Vietnam border. Through survey and learning about respondents' lives and experiences during the epidemic, the research results shows that the Chinese language proficiency of Zhuang villagers is not enough to meet their crisis communication needs and they need to turn to intermediaries. Living in the background of Putonghua as the national language, Zhuang people also exist as a linguistic minority. In a time of crisis of, they are faced with all kinds of inconveniences caused by language challenges.

In the communication of public health information, emphasis should be placed on the effective use of indigenous languages and traditional tools to help ethnic minority groups or vulnerable linguistic groups in other regions to obtain information. In the era of rapid development of information technology, the media used in People's daily life are constantly updated and iterated. Today, WeChat, Tik Tok and Weibo have become important applications in people's lives in China, while loudspeaker, as an outdated medium, has long disappeared in big cities. In the Zhuang village in the borderland, however, loudspeaker still plays an important role. When Chinese, English, Japanese and other popular languages get the public attention, Zhuang language as one of the minority languages when the coronavirus outbreak, played a role that these popular languages could not replace. The village head regularly broadcast the latest news of the epidemic in Zhuang language on the loudspeaker. The familiar and intimate oral Zhuang language echoed in the ears of every Zhuang villager. It is an effective way for Zhuang villagers to get the latest news during the epidemic period and is the most pleasant voice for Zhuang villagers to feel safe and warm.

The use of local traditional arts as language carriers helps ethnic minorities or other linguistic vulnerable groups in emergency situations to eliminate their negative emotions. Conveying the knowledge of epidemic prevention and strengthening feelings of loyalty to the country in the form of clappers in Zhuang language can not only do a good job in epidemic prevention and control, but also do a good job in national border security. The musicality of clappers not only relieves the pressure of the listeners, but also helps people to remember the content of it and then further understand the content and finally put it into action. These contents are more conducive to consolidating the unity of ethnic minorities along the border. Only by stabilizing the border can border security be guaranteed better. Combining "national unity" and "trust in the government" with the local traditional arts will help comfort the residents in the border areas when similar crisis occurs in the future.

Considering that National language is sometimes substituted by oral ethnic minority languages in gathering regions of ethnic minorities, ethnic minority languages or other language varieties should also be noticed in times of crisis rather than be marginalized. In most parts of a country, the national language is the main language, both in spoken and written version. In this trend, some languages spoken by linguistic minorities are likely to be ignored. However, the study found that in a Zhuang ethnic village in the China-and-Vietnam Borderland, Zhuang villagers relied more on Zhuang language when crisis struck. Although Zhuang literacy does not appear in this village, Zhuang language voice is always present. It was the invisible but audible sound that helped the villagers slowly recover from the epidemic.

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