How the English Language Dominates Disaster Research and Practice

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In 2020, many of us heard the words ‘resilience’, ‘vulnerability’ or ‘risk’ in a new context: a global pandemic. These words are frequently used when we talk about disasters, and though we probably associate such words, used in the context of being externally threatened, with our personal experience, we all comprehend them slightly differently. These and other words, such as ‘hazards’ or ‘capacities’, form professional disaster-related terminology that is used globally by researchers, NGOs, donor agencies as well as politicians; these words are consequently translated into diverse languages. Many policies and practices to secure the wellbeing of the public are focused on ‘building resilience’, ‘developing capacity’ or ‘decreasing vulnerability’.

In Colombia, for instance, ‘resilience’ has become integral to government policy for disaster risk reduction yet the word is unfamiliar to the general public. The local media has actually attempted to explain resilience in plain Spanish in order to frame stories about strength, but the translation itself is burdened by intellectual debate and neoliberal undertones. For example, whilst resilience is often portrayed by politicians as a panacea to all ills, many scholars point out that such terminology is often used to justify the transfer of responsibility for oppressive social conditions to the individual.

At first glance, a disconnect between the terms used by academics, bureaucrats and practitioners and those used by lay audiences might not seem like a big deal. But this disconnect can cause ‘experts’ to misunderstand people’s lived experiences, or overlook (sometimes intentionally) their struggle for social justice. This terminology is most often translated from English into other languages, and deployed around the world in locations where disasters are encountered. But can policy (and action) respond to the real needs and expectations of ordinary citizens if we persist with translated terminology that is already so badly missing the mark?

Local knowledge is so often overlooked as practitioners involved in managing disaster risk – and hazard events – brandish ‘insider jargon’ such as *building resilience* and rush to impose post-disaster solutions that are prone to leaving local residents somewhat bemused. In Georgian, the word გამძლეობა (‘resilience’) is only used by foreign NGOs and policy makers. The general public has very little understanding of what is implied and what actions might take places when various programmes – such as 100 Resilient Cities – are implemented. The people actually affected by efforts to ‘build resilience’ in Georgia are therefore very unlikely to have a central role in project planning and implementation.

And. interactions between cultures are power laden. The speaker of English holds a position of unwarranted superiority, and so often the purse strings. This can lead to actions that are ineffective – such as culturally insensitive aid – or that are of benefit only to the elite and powerful. Even when genuine intention to help reduce risk is present, action can fail due to the lack of a common language – not just literally but metaphorically.

Because of these problems manifesting in disaster affected locations, we became interested in the actual process of translation. What happens to the meaning of disaster concepts when translated into other languages? And does the language that we use actually support a challenge to oppressive social norms and external threats? In this recently

published paper, we presented our analysis of the data. Across 54 languages we found that the words used to translate words such as 'resilience', 'vulnerability' or 'disaster' actually often meant little to local people. Our study was the first to explore how the dominance of English affects the meaning of disaster concepts when they are translated, and to suggest how we could do things differently.

Since the start of the 20th century, English has gradually become *lingua franca*. This is particularly evident in science, where scholars and universities are forced to comply with expectations for education and scholarship. Scholars and universities are instantly marginalised if they are unable or unwilling to use the language. This reinforces unequal power relations by creating the language norms by which one gets published, wins grants and achieves policy-maker buy-in. Those who play by these rules are more successful according to all academic metrics. Yet, these publications are rarely accessible to the communities who are being researched, and provide little to no benefit to local people.

Beyond the use of the English language, Western approaches dominate in both research and practice related to disasters. The usage of a specialised terminology and underlying meaning among 'experts' cements this dominance. And the population of the domain by UN agencies, the World Bank, high-ranking global universities and monolithic humanitarian organisations attests to it. But languages are sensitive to the context in which they are used. For example, British English has many ways to talk about rain. Likewise, the languages of Mozambique can communicate specific environmental conditions found there. But after the floods of 2019, people in Mozambique typically had to use English when explaining their experiences to foreign aid workers, in order to access financial support, losing much sensitivity to the local culture and relationship to the environment.

While the most sustainable solutions often emerge in a local context, speakers of non-English languages are compelled to express themselves using categories and concepts developed in English (within a Western paradigm). And disaster research is no exception. For examples, the difference between a hazard and a disaster is clear in English: a disaster is not just an occurrence of a natural hazard; it is a combination of social and political factors and an exposure to a hazard. However, in many languages, these words used to translate these terms are used as synonyms. The range of meanings can reflect chance and randomness, or danger and destruction. Whilst the general connotation of these meanings is that something bad might happen, the use of separate terms in English obscures how they understood locally.

Even in English, words such as 'resilience' or 'vulnerability' lack a single, clear definition, and the debate about their meanings is often highly political. It makes translation difficult as it is nearly impossible to find a word in other languages that share precisely the same range of meanings.

Disaster is a naturally political space but is depoliticised in translation by international arbitrators. A consensus on language often leads to simplistic labelling of those not at the table (i.e. the 'other'). Vulnerability, for instance, is predominantly framed as weakness; it implies that certain groups of people need help, portraying them as poor victims and ignoring the fact that many people have coping mechanisms grounded in their traditional knowledges. This can be insulting and misses out on the emancipatory potential of the concept.

Language is irreducibly intertwined with culture. It is the key means of understanding the perspectives of different social groupings and their various members. Technical terminology, however, often fails to reflect the contextual nuances of daily life. For instance, the term resilience did not exist in everyday Nepali language. But the World Bank and IMF pioneered its usage, meaning 'community or country developing in the right and proper direction'. The implication is that 'not resilient' must mean 'not developing properly' – i.e. language is used to assign responsibility for survival and productivity to the people, despite unjust social conditions of destitution. They must strive on an individual level or be treated as 'underdeveloped'.

Translations of disaster terms so often miss the opportunity to recognise and take advantage of knowledge generated outside of a 'Western' framework. The interpretation of an outsider will always reflect their own knowledge, assumptions, and values, thus creating false 'stories' to fit their own expectations. The research aims to undermine this disempowering misstep, common in the disaster field among those also using 'insider jargon.'

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Our current norms serve to perpetuate power imbalances. They allow neoliberal agendas to flourish. Translation often lays bare the taken-for-granted assumptions and norms of both our own language and that of others. For disaster-related disciplines, the whole aim of which is to make the life of all people better, it is important to consider the complex interaction of cultures that is occurring when we practice and research. Our research points towards the need for deference to local origins of meaning. In doing this, we can appreciate the cultural and ideological 'baggage' of both English and the language into which words are translated and apply locally critical perspectives to enable translations that are more meaningful and relevant.

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