

# Case Study of the Current Situation and Development Proposals for Emergency Language Services in China

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**Abstract:** China's emergency language service has undergone significant development and continuously being enhanced since 2020. This paper examines the concept and development of China's emergency language service from the standpoint of China's emergency management system construction, using the National Emergency Language Service Corps of China as a case study and comparing it to the development of emergency language services in other countries. The study discovers flaws in China's emergency language services, such as ineffective institutional mechanisms, low productization, and a lack of talent.

**Keywords:** Emergency Management; China Emergency Language Services

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## Introduction

China's emergency language services have encountered additional hurdles after the pandemic in 2020. China's emergency language services have played critical roles in the country's fight against the epidemic, from emergency mobilization and science popularization to the preparation of dialect manuals and translation of information on domestic and international epidemic prevention and control materials. Since 2021, the State Council has issued "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening Language and Writing Work in the New Era," Opinions on the 14th Five-Year "National Emergency System Planning," and other documents that have integrated emergency language service system strengthening into national policies.

In practice, however, China's emergency language still has certain limitations. In comparison to other nations, such as simple English, Easy Japanese, and regulated language in French-German, China's emergency language service began late, lacked practical experience, and got little scholarly attention. In short, China's emergency language services face numerous challenges.

This paper uses the Emergency Language Service Corps of China as a case study, compares it to other nations' emergency language services, examines how to improve the professionalism of emergency language services, and gives a reference for building China's emergency language service system.

## 1. Background and review on the development of emergency language services in China

### 1.1 Background of emergency language services in China

Emergency language services are defined as language service behavior in specific contexts, i. e. , activities provided by actors with language and writing as the content or means to respond to sudden major natural disasters or public crisis events<sup>[1]</sup>. Emergency language services include national common languages, minority languages, foreign languages, dialects, and sign languages, and are provided in response to natural disasters, accidents and disasters, public health events, social security events, and other public emergencies, and are an important part of China's emergency management system. However, emergency language services have received little attention in China for a long time, and their development has been slow.

Emergency language services did not attract broad attention in China until the pandemic. Under the guidance of China's Ministry of Education and the State Language and Literature Working Committee, experts and scholars from Beijing Language and Culture University, Wuhan University, Huazhong Normal University, Tsinghua University, and other universities and relat-

ed units formed the “Language Service Corp Against the Pandemic” in February 2020 to assist medical teams assisting Hubei in the field to solve the problem of dialect barriers. The National Language Service Corps of China, supported by 29 institutions, corporations, associations, and organizations, was officially established in April 2022, which heralded the beginning of a new era in China’s emergency language services.

## **1.2 Review of emergency language services in China and other countries**

Countries all across the world place a high value on the study of emergency language services. Cadwell interviewed catastrophe victims in Japan and discovered that translation as a tool was useful in disaster aid <sup>[2]</sup>; Brien et al. investigated the normalization of translation used by Japan, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States in four dimensions: available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable <sup>[3]</sup>; Lewis investigated the use of Microsoft Translator in Haiti earthquake relief and argued that rapid deployment of computer translation technology as a language service technology is an essential part of disaster relief in response to sudden public events. <sup>[4]</sup>

China is also studying emergency language services in the aftermath of the 2020 Newcastle pneumonia outbreak. In 2006, the United States government launched the National Emergency Language Service Corps for emergencies or crises <sup>[5]</sup>; in Japan, there is a “simple Japanese language” that is used in the event of a disaster <sup>[6]</sup>, which is simple and concise form of expression. Wang Hui proposed establishing a sound emergency language governance mechanism, reserving emergency language talents, and strengthening the dissemination of emergency discourse <sup>[7]</sup>; Li Yuming argued that there is a lack of emergency language mechanisms in China, and proposed developing a language emergency mechanism and establishing a service team <sup>[8]</sup>.

## **2. Problems and shortcomings of emergency language services in China**

### **2.1 Imperfect institutional mechanism**

China reacted swiftly to the 2020 Newcastle pneumonia outbreak, launching a series of emergency language services across the country. However, from a practical standpoint, China’s emergency language services still rely on “sudden response” and lack systematization, scientificization, and standardization, and have not yet built a full response mechanism. Technical proficiency needs to be raised. For instance, National Emergency Language Service Corps of China, an official organization in this field, does not yet have connections with all of the nation’s colleges and government education agencies, and the general people cannot access this service through social media.

In addition, there is a lack of emergency language services infrastructure, and information technology is not advanced enough to communicate with injured people remotely, much less to offer them psychological support in the event of an emergency where rescuers are unable to initially reach the scene. Additionally, certain language service providers’ information technology applications are not robust enough, and the professional emergency terminology database still requires ongoing development. Therefore, improving information technology and institutional mechanisms are essential for the growth of emergency language services in China.

### **2.2 Low degree of productization**

Products designed to address emergency language needs are called emergency language service products <sup>[9]</sup>. The “Language Service Group for Fighting the Epidemic,” which is made up of specialists and academics from Wuhan University and Beijing Language and Culture University, has created emergency language service products like “Foreign Language for Fighting the Epidemic” and “Simplified Chinese for Fighting the Epidemic” in order to combat the epidemic. Li Yuming has established the precise standards for simplified Chinese vocabulary, grammar, and usage based on her practical experience in simple Japanese, simple English, and Chinese international education, with the main service targets being foreigners in China with HSK levels of 4 or higher.

However, Emergency language services have not been fully included into public life and social growth, and the public can only passively accept them and is unable to make independent decisions. Therefore, one of the top priorities for the growth of emergency language services in China over the next few years will be how to address the issue of low productization. If this issue is not resolved, China’s emergency language services might always respond passively to crises and won’t be able to effectively support the emergency management system’s emphasis on being “prevention-oriented and forward-looking.”

### **2.3 Insufficient professional talents**

Language workers are people who are fluent in one or more specific languages, such as sign languages, non-common languages, common languages, etc. , and who offer emergency language services to citizens of a particular area or nation. The talent training system is not yet perfect, and China’s emergency language services are still in the early stages of development.

There aren't many global epidemic information translation service platforms that can offer translation services in Chinese and other languages, minority languages, and sign language because the common language database and terminology knowledge base aren't open. Due to this, most schools only offer foreign language courses as prerequisites for careers in the field, with minors in emergency management, public health, and emergency response. As a result, foreign language majors are ultimately trained to be knowledgeable about emergency management rather than actual professionals who can provide emergency services.

If the issue of insufficient professional talent is not resolved, it would be challenging to mobilize talent in times of need. This will also have an impact on how emergency language services are institutionalized and commercialized, as discussed in this paper.

### **3. The path to improve China's emergency language service system**

#### **3.1 Improve laws and standards**

In times of crisis, well-crafted laws and regulations offer a crucial early response to efforts at disaster mitigation, relief, and prevention. For instance, food safety laws safeguard the public's health, and construction standards outline the seismic rating of buildings. Contrary to these, a significant unresolved issue in China is the absence of pertinent laws and standards for emergency language services. The technological requirements for emergency language services must also be improved, as well as the multilingual resource specification standard. First, laws pertaining to emergency language service organizations should be established to provide legal protection for staff, so as to avoid being unable to provide services in emergencies due to legal restrictions. Second, emergency language service organizations should be required to comply with standards for emergency language service protection. Third, guidelines for emergency language service protection should be developed to offer staff members technical, material, and financial security.

#### **3.2 Full implementation of productization**

China can benefit from Japan's concept of product creation, using the country's emergency language services as an example. Japan has built up a rich system of emergency language services for all types of people in society, including different countries, different industries, and special groups like people with disabilities. As a disaster-prone nation, Japan has accumulated rich experience in emergency language services before, during, and after major disasters. The Japanese public can access a variety of outlets to receive detailed disaster warning information on a daily basis. Hospitals have created language products for emergency medical services so that impacted people can quickly find a consultation room for medical treatment using multilingual medical access cards. When emergencies occur, the media quickly transmits information through multilingual products. As a result, China's emergency language services can incorporate China's current situation with the successful experiences of Japan and other nations to implement a comprehensive productization strategy. For instance, it can regularly disseminate early warning information through a variety of channels, such as new media platforms and emergency broadcasting, create products in emergency languages that cater to the needs of particular populations, incorporate Chinese dialects into product development, and so on.

#### **3.3 Increase the training of professional talents**

China's system for educating emergency language personnel is still not ideal, and it lacks clear guidelines for talent introduction and rewards. Therefore, in order to raise the entry bar for the sector, reinforce staff training, and improve the emergency language personnel training system, as well as to increase the professional level and service capability of emergency language services. To increase the professionalism and motivation of the staff, rewards must be given based on a thorough evaluation of the professional level and comprehensiveness, which must be strengthened in terms of assessment. In order to integrate professional knowledge, skills, and literacy of emergency language services into the curriculum, the setting of disciplines and majors at the school level needs to be adjusted from a practical standpoint. Additionally, practical teaching should be strengthened, and connections with the National Emergency Language Service Corps of China should be established in order to obtain more practical opportunities.

### **4. Conclusion**

National emergency management includes the use of emergency management jargon. The degree to which a language is prepared for emergency management reflects a nation's emergency management capabilities, and the volume of language preparation reflects a nation's commitment to fairness in crisis management. Natural disasters, public emergencies, and pandemics

have all increased the demands on emergency management. The National Emergency Language Service Corps of China as a metaphor for the need for China's emergency management professionals to adapt to the changing environment and concentrate on strengthening all facets of policy and planning, laws, regulations, and plans, intelligent service systems, preparedness exercises, and talent pool training. In order to advance the scientific advancement of emergency language services and direct practice, the academic community should also strengthen its research on emergency language services in various fields.

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