Emergency service provision in linguistically diverse societies

The challenges of providing equitable services in linguistically diverse societies

A few years ago, emergency service provision to speakers of languages other than English in Australia came under scrutiny when an Afghan woman tried to call the police but did not receive any assistance a few days before she was murdered by her husband. The domestic violence victim called 000 – the national telephone emergency service – twice but, in both cases, she hung up before the operator could bring a telephone interpreter into the conversation. The trial judge was scathing of multilingual service provision in her sentencing:

Then on 1 November 2007 your wife made two calls to triple 000 in the early hours of the morning seeking police assistance. It is most unfortunate and an indictment on our society that no assistance was forthcoming, as a result of a very disappointing reaction by the telephone operator, to your wife’s inability to speak English, in anything other than a broken English manner. (R V Azizi, 2010, p. S11)

Providing emergency services in linguistically heterogeneous environments is not an easy task. In Australia, as elsewhere, calls from callers who cannot make themselves understood in English are re-routed to the national telephone interpreter service. Negotiating for an interpreter service and then waiting for the interpreter to come online in an emergency is time-consuming and stressful. As Raymond (2014) found in a study of Spanish calls to the US emergency telephone service, sending a call through to the telephone interpreting service more than doubled the response time and thus was often resisted by the operator because that additional time could make the difference between life and death in an acute emergency.

Given the time it takes to re-route an emergency call through the telephone interpreting service, it is perhaps not surprising that the domestic violence victim mentioned above became impatient or was forced to abandon her call for help before she could actually communicate with the police. What is surprising is that no attempt was made to call her back and no police car was dispatched to her place of residence despite her two failed attempts to call emergency services.

Domestic violence is a well-recognized problem in Australia and there is a network of formal support services available to women who find themselves in danger. However, these formal support services operate exclusively in English and gaining access in another language remains difficult. As an examination of the barriers faced by migrant women in accessing legal services in NSW put it, persons who do not speak English well in Australia are “a long way from equal.” Cases like these challenge us to rethink linguistic arrangements in linguistically diverse contexts in order to make access to emergency services – and social services more generally – more equitable. It may be tempting to think that this is too tall an order and that ensuring equitable access in any language other than the nationally dominant language is too difficult.

Not so! In the above-mentioned study of Spanish-language calls in the USA, transfer of a Spanish-speaking caller to the telephone interpreting service almost doubled the response time and thus was highly inefficient. However, the situation was different in cases where bilingual operators were available in the same call center. In
such cases, a Spanish emergency call was immediately transferred to a bilingual operator and the response
time was virtually unaffected. So, a way to provide effective multilingual services would be to hire multilingual
telephone operators who can handle calls in the dominant language and one or more other languages.

Now here is the rub: in the city where the researcher recorded the bulk of his data no single bilingual operator
who spoke Spanish was on the staff. When one knows about the demographic profile of that city, the absence
of English-Spanish bilingual emergency telephone operators becomes almost unbelievable: the city where the
research took place is located in the US Southwest and at the time of data collection in 2010 more than 50% of
the city’s population were of Hispanic/Latino origin. This information turns the assumption that monolingual
emergency services are natural and normal on its head: only employing monolingual English-speaking
emergency telephone operators in such a bilingual context almost seems perversely designed to prevent fair
and equitable access. I am not for a moment suggesting that monolingual emergency services are the result of
some sort of conspiracy. They are not. They are an expression of our collective failure of imagination: a failure
to recognize that linguistic diversity poses an equity problem and a failure to imagine that we can change our
social linguistic arrangements in ways that make them more equitable and just.

Raymond, Chase Wesley (2014). Negotiating Entitlement to Language: Calling 911 without English
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