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Communication in International Humanitarian Relief: Profiling Ukrainian Boundary Spanners

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Abstract: Boundary spanning—the actions and roles individuals or organizations undertake to bridge differences and facilitate communication, collaboration, and understanding across diverse cultural, organizational, or geographical divisions—is an essential element of international cooperation. Set against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, The purpose of this study is to explore the type of boundary spanning in this uncertain context, the linguistic characteristics of boundary spanners, the necessary skills and competencies required to navigate the complex socio-political landscape, and the role of boundary spanners in humanitarian assistance. This study employs a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews with informants actively engaged in relief efforts and cross-cultural collaboration. The findings emphasized the significance of English as the primary language of communication, the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness, and the need for intercultural competence in effective boundary spanning. The study concludes with insights from the ongoing Ukrainian experience of bridging geodemographic boundaries and the role of boundary spanners in this process, highlighting key aspects of boundary spanning. Overall, the study contributes to the theoretical background of boundary spanning and enhances the understanding of how linguistic and cultural boundary spanning can drive positive change and improve outcomes in humanitarian aid. The implications of this study suggest that underscore the critical need for collaboration with experienced boundary spanners in educational settings.

1. Introduction

The era of intensive and comprehensive geopolitical interaction and change not only fosters global development but also exacerbates social disparities and humanitarian crises. These challenges necessitate continuous advancements in international cooperation. Therefore, the ability to articulate needs and ideas, engage with international partners, and exchange resources and experiences has become increasingly crucial. Inter- and intranational conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, further underscore the importance of communication in uniting allies and fostering international cooperation and mutual support. Consequently, individuals who strive to address these issues can serve as key mediators, adept at bridging cultural, linguistic, and organizational divides to promote collaboration and mutual understanding among diverse stakeholders.

In the realm of international affairs, the ability to navigate linguistic and cultural differences is essential for facilitating meaningful dialogue and establishing effective partnerships. However, language barriers often hinder international cooperation, particularly in crisis situations where swift and accurate communication is imperative. Therefore, the selection of a lingua franca—often English in today's global context—plays a pivotal role in transcending linguistic boundaries and fostering trust among stakeholders. This is especially relevant in humanitarian aid efforts, where effective communication is crucial for ensuring the timely and coordinated delivery of assistance. Furthermore, individuals who operate across community and cultural boundaries play a central role in this process. By leveraging their linguistic and interpersonal skills, they connect internal organizational networks or personal affiliations with external sources of information and resources, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of humanitarian operations.

The concept of boundary spanning, as theorized by scholars such as M. Tushman and J.S. Adams, highlights the strategic importance of individuals who function effectively at the intersection of various domains (Tushman, 1977; Adams, 1976). Over time, research on boundary spanning has evolved to encompass multinational organizations (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) and intercultural communication

(Barmeyer et al., 2020), further emphasizing the critical role of bridging organizational and cultural divides to enhance communication. These studies also

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underscore the significance of individuals who perform this function. However, while previous research has acknowledged the role of boundary spanners, discussions on their language proficiency and personality traits have often been indirect or secondary to broader organizational concerns.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing both theoretical frameworks and practical applications of boundary spanning in humanitarian aid. Specifically, it examines how boundary spanners enable NGOs, governmental bodies, and local communities to collaborate more effectively by navigating complex socio-political environments through language. Moreover, it seeks to highlight how these individuals foster dialogue, drive positive change at both local and global levels, and address the unique challenges posed by uncertain times. Additionally, this study explores the linguistic skills, competencies, and personal attributes required for effective boundary spanning, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its significance in international humanitarian efforts.

2. Literature review

We extrapolated the term *boundary spanning* from organizational psychology to our research to describe volunteers or NGO representatives within the field of humanitarian aid who assume the role of linking their organization's internal networks or personal networks with external sources of information during times of uncertainty (cf. Tushman, 1977). Boundary-spanning individuals are expected to foster trust within specific communities due to their expertise in defined areas, as well as their shared values, language, and priorities with the communities in which they operate.

The concept of boundary spanning originates from organizational psychology, which suggests (Adams, 1976) that extensive communication occurs through individual ties that cross internal boundaries, thereby strengthening an organization's external (including international) connections. In their seminal study, P. Monge and E. Eisenberg emphasized that boundary spanners maintain communicative linkages to "monitor, exchange with, or represent the organization to its environment" (Monge & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 313). M.J. Dollinger further elaborated that boundary spanning is critical to organizations because the flow of information it generates enables them to better understand and respond to dynamic environments (Dollinger, 1984). Much of the literature in organizational psychology has focused on the personal and interpersonal skills of boundary spanners and their ability to navigate networks in an inter-organizational context.

More recent efforts aim to strengthen the relationship between science and policy in addressing complex social problems and developing practical approaches to boundary spanning (e.g., Bednarek et al., 2016). A research team led by A. Bednarek proposed a value proposition for boundary-spanning activities, highlighting the challenges and opportunities associated with mainstreaming these practices, particularly for integrating scientific research into decision-making. These insights can be extended to the humanitarian sector, emphasizing the significance of language skills, personal competencies, and cultural sensitivity for boundary spanners engaged in humanitarian aid.

The role of inter-organizational communication in international affairs remains underexplored. The fundamental idea of this cooperation is that boundary spanners must address complex social challenges in a broad international context. This involves understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders impacted by an issue, including their interpretations of its root causes, institutional and political motivations, perceptions of one another, assessments of the validity and significance of available evidence, methods of accessing and interpreting information, and opinions on possible solutions and their feasibility. Decisions made without accounting for these factors are unlikely to meet the information needs of the decision-making process. Thus, the concept of boundary spanning in international communication, particularly in crisis situations such as humanitarian aid, warrants further investigation.

Our study focuses on boundary-spanning efforts during the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis. NGOs, as key actors in humanitarian aid, are increasingly recognized as boundary spanners. These organizations represent marginalized communities, communicate global crises, advocate for universal human rights, and raise awareness of humanitarian needs (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Peet & Hartwick, 2009). The ongoing war in Ukraine provides a compelling context to examine boundary spanning in international cooperation. As J. Sterman (2000) suggests, boundary spanning in international cooperation can help stabilize decision-making in times of crisis by fostering communication and knowledge transfer.

The primary objective in such decision-making processes is to incorporate diverse perspectives, especially as political dynamics evolve. Boundary spanners play a crucial role in ensuring stability by enhancing communication and facilitating knowledge exchange, ultimately fostering meaningful, trusted relationships among stakeholders. This research highlights the essential language skills, communication competencies, and cultural awareness required of boundary spanners to optimize their role in humanitarian decision-making.

In the humanitarian aid sector, boundary spanning involves various actors, including volunteers, NGOs, volunteer organizations, and charitable funds. Volunteers or NGO representatives who engage in boundary spanning—whether consciously or unconsciously—may have a distinct advantage in addressing complex problems and fostering innovative solutions. The Center for Creative Leadership initiated research in 2022 on the

importance of collaboration across boundaries. The lead researchers of the Center, Hort and Ernst (2022), identified key benefits of boundary spanning, including:

- Improved knowledge transfer between organizations, business units, and individuals (e.g., donors, charitable funds, sponsors);

- More effective and diverse modes of cooperation and communication (virtual, remote, in-person); and

- The need for global thinking and interregional cooperation, which requires strong language skills and the development of global and intercultural competencies.

These benefits are particularly relevant to humanitarian aid efforts during crises, such as geopolitical tensions, wars, and natural disasters. According to the Center for Creative Leadership (Yip et al., 2011/2020), five types of boundaries may require spanning: *horizontal* (organizational functions), *vertical* (hierarchical levels), *stakeholder* (external groups), *demographic* (diverse groups, e.g. gender, generation, nationality, culture, personality, ideology) and *geographic* (across localities, e.g. regions, markets, distances). In international humanitarian aid, particular attention must be paid to demographic and geographic boundaries to maximize the effectiveness of cooperation. Moreover, once boundary spanning extends beyond organizational limits, bridging *geodemographic boundaries* becomes crucial. This paper conceptualizes g*eodemographic boundary spanning as the integration of demographic attributes within a geographic region, facilitating resource sharing and improving decision-making efficiency*.

Applying the concept of boundary spanning to humanitarian aid can enhance the efficiency and coordination of relief efforts. The complex and dynamic nature of humanitarian work—especially during ongoing conflicts—makes boundary-spanning particularly valuable. This can manifest in various ways, including inter-organizational collaboration, community engagement, international cooperation, technological and innovative solutions, and information-sharing practices.

Our research focuses on cross-sectoral engagement, particularly academic and research collaboration, which provides valuable insights for improving humanitarian aid practices. Through such collaborations, researchers can design communication strategies, language training programs, and essential skills to facilitate effective boundary spanning in uncertain and high-pressure environments. Unlike relatively stable business relations, humanitarian aid efforts require unique competencies, including the development of intercultural communication skills and language proficiency in crisis settings. By fostering collaboration, communication, and partnerships across multiple boundaries, boundary spanning can contribute to a more integrated and effective humanitarian aid ecosystem, ensuring that diverse stakeholders work synergistically to address the challenges of crisis response.

3. Methodology

To explore the practical application of boundary spanning in international communication and humanitarian aid, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals actively engaged in relief efforts and cross-cultural collaboration (N=15). The interviews followed a pre-determined set of open-ended questions, allowing flexibility for participants to share context-specific insights. As emphasized by Yin (2016), this qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of complex human experiences, making it particularly effective for understanding the nuances of boundary spanning in diverse, crisis-driven environments. To ensure that the findings would be relevant to all boundary spanners, two key criteria were applied in participant selection:

a) Relevant experience in humanitarian aid during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

b) Membership in an NGO or any non-profit organization (e.g., charity fund).

The participants represented peer groups with similar experience in the field (ranging from five to fifteen people per group). To enhance the representativeness of the sample, efforts were made to include a diverse group of individuals across different roles (NGO representatives, humanitarian workers, academic researchers, and local volunteers) and regions within Ukraine, capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences. However, potential selection bias must be considered when drawing conclusions. The sample may exclude individuals working in other types of organizations (e.g., governmental agencies, for-profit contractors), whose perspectives may differ from those of NGO representatives. Additionally, since the participants possessed specific expertise, responses may lean toward more structured and formal viewpoints, potentially underrepresenting the perspectives of grassroots volunteers. Nevertheless, to minimize bias and enhance reliability, interviewees were selected from organizations with different operational scales, ranging from large, well-established NGOs to smaller, grassroots initiatives. This approach aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of boundary-spanning practices and their challenges across diverse contexts.

The interviews were conducted in person, online, or via telephone or video calls between October 2023 and March 2024. Several steps were taken to uphold ethical research standards and protect participant rights. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To maintain confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed, and anonymized data was used during the analysis. Furthermore, all

collected data was securely stored and protected following institutional data protection protocols, safeguarding participant privacy and data integrity throughout the study.

The interviews aimed to provide insights into the roles and perspectives of boundary spanners, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to foster effective communication and collaboration across diverse stakeholders. The participants included 15 NGO representatives, humanitarian workers, and academic researchers who were also members of volunteer groups. Each had first-hand experience organizing and delivering humanitarian assistance in Ukraine, particularly since the onset of the war with Russia in 2022. Through open-ended questions, the interviews explored the practical dynamics of boundary spanning, examined its implications for improving coordination and effectiveness in humanitarian aid efforts, and investigated communication with donors and local communities. They also delved into challenges encountered and boundary spanners' reflections on their roles.

The interviews provided unique insights into interpersonal and intercultural communication, particularly the role and practice of boundary-spanning in international humanitarian aid. Given the need for flexibility in exploring the issue, thematic coding was used to analyze the data. After a careful review of the interview transcripts, recurring themes such as *language choice*, *cultural misunderstanding*, *local communities*, and *language policy* emerged. These themes were further analyzed and categorized to outline the key findings from boundary spanners' experiences. As Yin (2016) suggests, thematic analysis is crucial in qualitative research as it helps identify patterns and relationships within the data, providing a clearer understanding of complex phenomena. The analysis identified two critical aspects essential to effective international cooperation*: language proficiency and cultural mediation*. However, it is important to note that these findings are highly context-dependent, and shaped by the current geopolitical situation in Ukraine. The political sensitivity surrounding language use and the specifics of the Ukraine-Russia conflict mean that conclusions regarding language and cultural mediation may not be directly applicable to other humanitarian contexts. The experiences of boundary spanners in different regions or types of aid work may vary significantly due to distinct linguistic, cultural, or political challenges.

All respondents (N=15) reported that language choice is currently a politically and socially charged issue in Ukraine, given the country's complex history with Russia. Since Ukrainian is not widely spoken outside Ukraine, and nearly a third of adult residents do not speak a foreign language (Yashnyk, 2023), language mediation presents a significant challenge. One respondent, fluent in German and Russian but with only basic English proficiency, illustrated this challenge with a personal experience: while coordinating humanitarian aid from Germany, he communicated in English with a local Ukrainian volunteer who was fluent in Russian but had only basic English proficiency. Both agreed to speak English, despite the added effort, to avoid using Russian.

Interviewees unanimously emphasized that selecting the appropriate working language is crucial, as it demonstrates cultural sensitivity, fosters mutual understanding, and reduces the risk of miscommunication. Using a language that is familiar and comfortable to local communities helps establish trust and facilitates collaboration. Participants noted that even basic phrases such as "hi," "how are you?," and "thank you" were appreciated by local communities and contributed to building rapport. Given Ukraine's regional linguistic diversity, boundary spanners are often recruited from specific mission areas to enhance cultural affinity and mitigate tensions related to native language use. Additionally, the acquisition of even basic Ukrainian skills among expatriate humanitarian workers remains a low priority. Many staff members of established NGOs, even those cooperating with Ukrainian stakeholders since 2014, have little proficiency in the local language.

Regarding language choice, respondents reported that in the current geopolitical climate, many Ukrainians actively avoid speaking Russian, which is perceived as the language of the aggressor. In practice, this means that numerous native Russian-speaking Ukrainians, particularly from the eastern regions, have adopted Ukrainian as their primary language. In humanitarian aid operations, Ukrainian and English are the most common working languages, depending on the language skills available. Some respondents noted that the aversion to Russian is so strong that Ukrainians in need of humanitarian assistance would prefer to use basic English rather than fluent Russian, even when the interlocutor is proficient in Russian.

The interviews identified two primary approaches to spanning linguistic boundaries:

1. **Formal approach** – Organizations employ professional interpreters or cultural mediators who provide precise linguistic and cultural mediation between local communities and boundary spanners.

2. **Ad hoc approach** – Field workers or local volunteers use their available language skills to facilitate communication, often on an impromptu basis.

While professional interpreters ensure high accuracy, ad hoc interpretation—commonly used by smaller organizations—offers expediency but may compromise precision. This contrast highlights the importance of both formal and informal boundary-spanning strategies to accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural needs.

When Ukrainian language skills were unavailable, English was overwhelmingly selected as the working language for humanitarian assistance. Respondents noted that using English ensures clear and accurate communication, minimizing misunderstandings. Additionally, English as a lingua franca fosters a collaborative atmosphere, enabling actors from different countries to work together more effectively. Ukrainian boundary

spanners also observed that using English with international partners increases foreign aid workers' comfort, particularly among native English speakers who may have implicit expectations regarding communication norms. Meeting these expectations demonstrates respect and consideration for international partners, reinforcing productive collaboration.

The findings suggest an urgent need to improve English proficiency in crisis-affected countries, as humanitarian aid is often delivered to developing or least-developed nations where English is not widely spoken.

Interestingly, 20% of respondents reported that communication was significantly smoother with **non-native** English speakers. In multilingual environments where all parties used English as an L2, speakers naturally adopted a slower speech rate and simpler vocabulary to facilitate comprehension. In contrast, native English speakers were often perceived as less adept at adjusting their language for clarity. One respondent noted a distinction between national speaker groups, suggesting that Americans were generally more accommodating in moderating their speech than their British counterparts.

Finally, the interviews revealed that many organizations lack a formal institutional language policy or structured training programs. Instead, communication strategies tend to be adapted flexibly based on the available language skills of staff and local communities. Our research may contribute to the development of targeted language training programs that incorporate thematic case studies and essential cultural communication strategies for boundary spanners in humanitarian settings.

4. Discussion

Choosing an appropriate language for communication is critical for boundary spanners who facilitate interaction across diverse cultural, organizational, and disciplinary boundaries. The effectiveness of boundary spanning depends significantly on communication skills that resonate with various stakeholders. Linguistic barriers are a well-documented challenge in international cooperation, particularly in humanitarian aid. A practical crisis translation research highlighted that language translation practices in crisis situations often remain underdeveloped, exacerbating these barriers (Federici et al., 2019). Moreover, a survey found that nearly 99% of humanitarian workers believe language barriers hinder effective communication, with 43% attributing this to inadequate interpreter training (Businario, 2012; as cited in Moser-Mercer et al., 2014).

In Ukraine, language use is highly politicized (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, efforts at derussification have intensified, particularly following the Euromaidan protests in 2014 and the Russian invasions in 2022 (Kulyk, 2023). Although one-third of the population speaks Russian, many have shifted to Ukrainian in daily life, especially after the Russian invasion (Kulyk, 2024). English has become the lingua franca for international aid delivery, making proficiency in English a key skill for those seeking to bridge the gap between international aid workers and local populations (Inghilleri, 2010; Peters, 2016; Moser-Mercer et al., 2021). Boundary spanning involves the exchange of information, ideas, and knowledge, making language skills and intercultural competence essential for successful communication. Communication skills, personal connections, and cultural awareness of boundary spanners play a crucial role in decision-making, problem-solving, and building partnerships with donors.

Nonetheless, English language proficiency is far from universal in Ukraine. Only 51% of the population reports having some knowledge of English, with language skills concentrated in urban centers (Yashnyk, 2023). Consequently, communication between locals and foreign humanitarian workers is frequently hampered by language and cultural barriers. Aid organizations address this challenge both formally, by employing local translators, and informally, by leveraging the language skills of multilingual staff for ad hoc translation in the field. In our study, it was reported that decisions regarding language use and interpretation strategies were often made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the availability of language skills. This highlights the need for systematic approaches to language use in humanitarian aid.

In the context of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, addressing geodemographic boundaries has proven essential for effective cooperation. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that overcoming language and cultural differences is critical for facilitating successful international aid efforts. Given Ukraine's complex linguistic landscape and the political sensitivity surrounding language use, selecting an appropriate primary language—often Ukrainian or English—helps bridge communication gaps and fosters an atmosphere of cooperation. This choice demonstrates cultural sensitivity and builds trust between boundary spanners and local communities, which has been researched by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha (Barakat & Milton, 2020). Ukraine in the contemporary conflict is vivid evidence of communication gaps bridging, especially considering the historical aversion to the Russian language and the limited foreign language proficiency among Ukrainians.

Moreover, our research findings reveal that while cultural sensitivity is essential for fostering trust and effective communication in humanitarian aid, it can sometimes conflict with the operational efficiency of organizations. The need to respect local customs and languages may introduce delays or additional complexities in decision-making, particularly in crisis situations where rapid response is critical (Footitt et al., 2018; Chmutina et al, 2021; Nuc Blazic, 2024). For instance, reliance on multilingual staff or local translators, though vital for bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, may slow down aid delivery, especially in urgent contexts where time is of

the essence. Furthermore, in politically sensitive environments like Ukraine, NGOs may find themselves navigating a delicate balance between respecting local language preferences (such as prioritizing Ukrainian over Russian) and the practical necessity of using a lingua franca like English to coordinate international efforts. This dynamic can create tension between cultural sensitivity and operational speed, making it essential for organizations to strike a balance between respecting local cultural norms and maintaining the efficiency required for effective humanitarian intervention (Jong, 2018; Roth, 2019; Schneiker & Joachim, 2021).

The importance of English as a lingua franca for international collaboration, particularly in the context of humanitarian aid, extends far beyond Ukraine's borders. As interviews with humanitarian workers and NGO representatives illustrate, English serves as a crucial medium for communication among stakeholders from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In many conflict zones or underdeveloped countries, local populations may not share a common language with international aid workers, making English the inevitable choice for cross-border collaboration. In this context, English facilitates the accurate transmission of vital information, reduces the risk of miscommunication, and enables smoother interactions between boundary spanners and local communities. Furthermore, using English as a shared language ensures a standardized approach to problem-solving, fostering efficient teamwork across national boundaries (Rossi, 2019; Garrido, 2020; Vitantonio, 2022). This is particularly important in settings with vast linguistic diversity, where no single local language can bridge the gap between all parties involved. The widespread use of English also enhances the comfort level of international partners, particularly those from English-speaking countries, aligning with cultural norms and expectations, which contributes to a more cohesive and effective aid response (Garrido, 2020, 2024).

Additionally, the geographical focus on involving local mediators from specific regions can strengthen cultural connections and reduce the risk of conflict. A thorough understanding of linguistic and cultural boundaries is essential for improving cooperation and humanitarian aid delivery. This underscores the importance of developing English language proficiency and intercultural competence, particularly in higher education settings, to nurture future boundary spanners. There is also a vital need to collaborate with experienced boundary spanners in educational settings, as they are potential stakeholders in academia. For aspiring boundary spanners, it is crucial to develop global citizenship attributes, including excellent communication, cooperation, and social skills, as well as creativity, flexibility, initiative, productivity, and the ability to think critically and globally.

To address these challenges, NGOs should adopt a more structured and systematic approach to language policies and training programs. First, developing a clear, formalized language strategy based on the specific needs of the local context will enable organizations to better plan for language mediation, reducing the reliance on ad hoc decision-making that can slow down operations. NGOs should prioritize the recruitment and training of local translators and interpreters who are not only linguistically skilled but also culturally sensitive, ensuring that both language proficiency and an understanding of local dynamics are integrated into the communication process. Additionally, NGOs can invest in comprehensive language and intercultural competence training for their staff, focusing on both soft skills—such as empathy and active listening—and technical skills—such as translation and negotiation. By combining structured language policies, technology, and targeted training, NGOs can better navigate the complexities of cultural sensitivity, political dynamics, and operational efficiency, ultimately improving both the effectiveness and speed of humanitarian aid delivery.

5.   Research Implications

In the field of humanitarian aid, boundary spanning enhances coordination and effectiveness by facilitating collaboration, communication, and partnerships across various stakeholders. The boundary spanners we interviewed emphasized the importance of their linguistic and intercultural skills in bridging the gap between international organizations and the Ukrainian population. Moreover, the choice of language—particularly English as a lingua franca—has facilitated smoother communication and collaboration. However, cultural sensitivity and awareness remain crucial for successful boundary spanning. Ultimately, effective boundary spanning has the potential to drive positive change and improve outcomes in international affairs and humanitarian aid, ensuring that diverse stakeholders work together synergistically to address complex challenges and provide assistance in times of uncertainty.

Beyond Ukraine, the need for a lingua franca like English is paramount in international collaborations, particularly in regions facing crises or underdevelopment. English provides an accessible and neutral platform for communication, allowing actors from various countries to coordinate efforts without being hindered by language barriers. This is particularly significant in humanitarian aid, where the speed and precision of communication can directly impact the success of relief operations. Moreover, although English proficiency among local populations in crisis zones is not always high, it can still play a crucial role in improving the effectiveness of aid delivery. As a result, international organizations are increasingly emphasizing the importance of English language skills within their training programs to ensure better integration of local communities into global humanitarian networks. By fostering a common linguistic framework, English enables organizations and individuals to transcend linguistic and cultural differences, thereby enhancing the overall impact of humanitarian efforts worldwide.

The interviews revealed two key areas for improvement in boundary spanning between humanitarian workers and local populations. First, the ad hoc language policies of many organizations, which often rely on the random

availability of multilingual staff, create inconsistencies in communication. Second, there is a clear need for more formalized language training and intercultural competence programs, both for the general population and professional interpreters. While technological tools such as automated translation continue to improve, they cannot replace the interpersonal mediation, relationship-building, and creative problem-solving that are essential to effective boundary spanning.

6. Future Research

Moving forward, the findings of this research have significant implications for global humanitarian practices, particularly in conflict-affected regions. As the study underscores the crucial role of boundary spanners and the use of a lingua franca like English, these insights can inform international humanitarian aid strategies, enabling more effective coordination and communication across diverse stakeholders. In other conflict zones, such as Syria or Yemen, where cultural, linguistic, and political complexities abound, boundary-spanning practices can facilitate smoother operations and ensure more timely and precise aid delivery. Organizations could adopt standardized yet adaptable language policies that promote both linguistic proficiency and cultural sensitivity, ensuring better integration of local populations into global humanitarian networks.

Higher education institutions can play a critical role in fostering boundary spanners by integrating language and intercultural competence into curricula. Moreover, there is a need for continued research and exploration into effective boundary-spanning practices, particularly in dynamic and evolving international crisis contexts. Future research could examine how boundary-spanning practices can be refined to address emerging global challenges, such as refugee crises and climate-induced displacement. Additionally, studying the evolving role of technology in language mediation—while balancing it with human-centric approaches—could offer valuable insights into improving humanitarian response efforts. The continued emphasis on intercultural competence, language skills, and collaboration will be essential in shaping the effectiveness of international humanitarian aid, particularly in regions where language and cultural barriers remain significant challenges.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of boundary spanners in facilitating effective communication and collaboration in humanitarian aid. The findings emphasize that language choice and cultural sensitivity are critical factors influencing the success of boundary spanning, particularly in crisis settings like the Russia-Ukraine war. While English serves as a key lingua franca, linguistic limitations and the politicization of language present challenges that necessitate structured communication policies and cultural mediation strategies.

Beyond Ukraine, these insights reinforce the global importance of linguistic and intercultural competence in humanitarian efforts. By prioritizing formalized training, standardized language policies, and institutional support, humanitarian organizations can enhance coordination, build trust, and improve aid effectiveness. Strengthening boundary-spanning strategies is crucial for ensuring more resilient, efficient, and inclusive global humanitarian interventions.

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During the preparation of this work, the authors used the GPT-3 Chart to optimize the writing process and to compile questionnaires and interview programmes. As one of the authors (K.Guertler) is a native English speaker, she reviewed and edited the language and the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Data availability: Data are available upon request. Please contact the authors for any additional information on data access or usage.

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