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Lost in Translation: How Mistranslations Can Become Disinformation

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Lost in Translation: Disinformation in Mistranslations

Presenter
Noah Lee

BACKGROUND:

Translations are complex due to differences in language, so mistranslations can be misleading but appear to make sense. Some mistranslations can sway opinions or decide life or death for some, so analysis of intentional mistranslations as disinformation is an important task.

METHODS

I used Deen Freelon and Chris Wells' definition of disinformation to narrow down examples of mistranslations that I could analyze. I then used their definition as well as Claire Wardle's definitions of disinformation types to analyze examples.

RESULTS

Examples I analyzed show that intentional mistranslations can be used by mis-translators to produce outcomes or sow chaos. Nuances in language are not easily apparent to readers of translations, so mistranslations are often taken at face value.

Chinese COVID Origins Narrative

According to media scholar Sheng Zou in his article about mistranslations, disinformation, and self-serving cosmopolitanism, there was an incident on Chinese social media where a blogger mistranslated the title of a CNN article about the origins of COVID-19. The original title said that the CDC found the first coronavirus case, of unknown origin, in the U.S. The mistranslation said that the CDC confirmed that the first coronavirus case originated in the U.S. (Zou 2021, 525), which delivered a completely different narrative compared to that of the original article. The new narrative played into existing anti-U.S. conspiracy theories that had been disseminated by both Chinese government officials and ordinary people on Chinese social media and news outlets (Molter et al. 2020). According to Zou (2021), the origins of the translation remain unknown, but the damage and confusion that the false translation could produce leaves it highly suspect of being maliciously crafted.

Intentional or misleading mistranslations are dangerous forms of disinformation, because differences in language are very complex and most people cannot understand the nuance.



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Kramatorsk Train Station Attack

After a tragic attack on refugees at a Ukrainian train station, a fragment of a missile was found (Specia and Levenson 2022) that appeared to have the words “за детей” painted on the side. This image spread quickly across social media platforms, such as Reddit. Commenters on posts about the event argued about the meaning of the phrase painted on the missile fragment. When plugged into Google translate, the phrase “за детей” translates into “for children”, which in the context of the missile would imply the perpetrator intended for the missile to kill children. A more accurate translation would say “[revenge] for the children”, which implies a completely different narrative. While the origin of the missile remains unknown, individuals will opt for Google's translation so that the event fits the narrative they prefer.



Photo Credit: Reuters/Stringer

“Mokusatsu”

Shortly before the end of World War II, pressed for a response to an allied ultimatum, Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki responded with the word “mokusatsu” (NSA, n.d.). Being a word with multiple meaning in English, allied leaders misunderstood the PM's tone and consequently nuked Japan shortly after (NSA, n.d.). In a declassified document, the NSA blames, in part, each of the parties involved, additionally noting that the translator was terribly wrong to not note the nuance of their translation. Surely in such dire circumstances, a translator would understand the potential consequences of translating important messages in the way that they do.

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