

THE LINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATING DISASTERS

Theresia Pratiwi

Peneliti Independen

languagework.inq@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Insufficient attention has been paid to the linguistic dimensions of effective science communication of disasters. This preliminary study paper argues for a greater integration of linguistic training into science communication, particularly in disaster communication, by demonstrating how paralinguistic and metalinguistic choices, translation practices, and plurilingual accessibility influence public comprehension, trust, and response. Misinterpretations of probabilistic language, culturally inappropriate framing, and poorly translated terminologies can undermine even the most scientifically accurate messages. Strengthening linguistic competence in science communication is a risk-reduction imperative that can improve public understanding.

Keywords: science communication, disaster communication, disaster linguicism

ABSTRAK

Perhatian yang diberikan pada dimensi linguistik komunikasi sains yang efektif tentang bencana masih sangatlah kurang. Penelitian pendahuluan ini bertujuan untuk mengampanyekan integrasi yang lebih besar akan pelatihan linguistik di dalam komunikasi sains, khususnya dalam komunikasi kebencanaan, dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pilihan paralinguistik dan metalinguistik, praktik penerjemahan, dan aksesibilitas pluribahasa memengaruhi pemahaman, kepercayaan, dan respons publik. Kesalahpahaman akan bahasa probabilistik, framing yang tidak sesuai secara budaya, dan terminologi yang diterjemahkan dengan buruk dapat merusak bahkan pesan yang paling akurat secara ilmiah. Memperkuat kompetensi linguistik dalam komunikasi sains adalah pengurangan risiko yang wajib yang dapat meningkatkan pemahaman sains publik.

Kata kunci: komunikasi sains, komunikasi kebencanaan, disaster linguicism

INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, Dr Widjo Kongko, a researcher from then-Indonesian Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT), now part of the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), faced police summons after his presentation at the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) office in Jakarta (*Tempo* 2018a). His presentation, an “initial assessment of potential tsunamis” in some regions in southwestern Java was deemed by the local Indonesian Police to “have caused concerns” among citizens in Pandeglang, an area where Dr Widjo assessed a 57-meter high tsunami wave could occur as “the worst possible scenario” of tsunamis (*The Jakarta Post* 2018). Consequently, BPPT issued an apology (*Tempo* 2018a) and BMKG Chief Dr Dwikorita Karnawati was also summoned to clarify (*CNBC Indonesia* 2024). Police dropped the investigation after Dr Widjo clarified his use of the term *prediksi* “prediction,” instead of *potensi* “potential,” which he acknowledged could lead to misunderstanding among the public (*Tempo* 2018b).

In another episode, the Joko Widodo administration faced criticism during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2022-June 2023), partly due to its communication of the counter-COVID-19 measures, relying mostly on narratives with the insistence on “keeping the public calm” (Alnizar and Manshur 2022) and secrecy (*Kompas* 2020). In what can be seen as archetypal disaster linguicism (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022), a 2020 controversy of the administration’s distinguishing the terms *mudik* “going to one’s hometown to celebrate Eid al-Fitr” from *pulang kampung* “returning to one’s hometown, especially practiced by those who reside in the Greater Jakarta region” broke, which later was bedraggled further as the National Agency for Disaster Countermeasure (BNPB) gave an addendum of clarification on the temporality of the distinction: *mudik* was a temporal mobility and *pulang kampung* was permanent. Adiprasetyo, Wibowo, and Anggia (2020) highlighted that such controversy was in fact counter-productive to the government’s large-scale mobility restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 put in place then, as well as opening more room for COVID-19-related misinformation.

Both episodes gave a glimpse into the state and its apparatus’ public-facing responsibilities, in which research was questioned and internal research dissemination was deemed disruptive. At large, as an example of science communication being subsumed under the umbrella of crisis communication, they also point to the way science communication in Indonesia operates in a complex environment shaped by linguistic diversity, paralinguistic and metalinguistic practice, and plurilingual accessibility via translation that influence public reception, comprehension, and trust.

Linguistic diversity

One major factor as to why science communication in Indonesia often intersects or even is practiced as crisis communication is the fact that the country is an archipelagic, disaster-prone home to a high-level of linguistic diversity. Indonesia's country profile on Ethnologue (<https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ID/>) lists at the very least 706 living indigenous languages. Yet, most science communication operates in Indonesian, the country's *de jure* unifying national language. On the one hand, this ensures a broad reach; on the other hand, Indonesian does not fully address the needs of the communities more at home with local indigenous languages, for many of whom Indonesian serves as a second or third language.

At the same time, Pérez-Llantada (2019) pointed at the undeniable role of English linguistic imperialism in global science, as English is its *de facto lingua franca*, as seen in its near-monolingual practice. In her research, the L1 English-speaking scientists and communicators found it “less important to participate in communication and social engagement activities” in funding acquirement compared to their L2 English-speaking/EAL peers. In a similar vein, Uekusa and Matthewman (2022, 2023) posited that the reluctance to expand the monolingual to plurilingual science communication practice resulted in disaster linguicism—language-based discrimination at multiple levels, which sometimes even resulting in fatalities (e.g. Federici 2016). In disaster situation, Indonesia is not exempt from these practice either.

Moreover, linguistic diversity does not stop at intelligibility among local languages; it also expands to genres, styles, and registers. In regions where linguistic diversity is high, science communication is bound to be equally diversified as well as fragmented and often bears little cross-community interaction (Davies et.al. 2021). This is not to say that scientists and science communicators do not undergo science communication training; rather, past research have questioned the emphasis on science communicators' having to acquire specific practical skills (Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein 2012), as seen from the rising numbers of practical public-speaking and media training for both scientists and science communicators. Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein also suggested science communication training better “fit the complex process in which scientists develop new knowledge, behaviors, skills, and attitudes” (2012). In practice, they might need to unlearn scientific training and engage with sociocultural environments that enable them to have more cross-community interaction and the ability to use nontechnical language and non-specialist norms when discussing science beyond their science community.

Paralinguistic and metalinguistic practice: the deficit model approach

Fingers have long been pointed at possible causes of the ineffectiveness of science communication, such as the widespread use of the deficit model approach (Besley and Tanner 2011), overreliance on jargons and reluctance on reducing their use (Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein 2012; Sharon and Baram-Tsabari 2013; Dean 2009; Martínez and Mammola 2020), and the bigger focus on “educating” or “defending science” rather than on building scientific literacy (Rowan and Pyle 2019).

Of the first, the deficit model approach decides on who is doing the explanation and who is receiving, creating a one-way, usually top-down directing of information more concerned with broadcast than with public engagement (Yutainten et.al. 2025). It reinforces hierarchical relationships, where scientists are placed as unquestionable authorities and the public as passive recipients (Chatfield and Reddick 2011; Yudarwati, Putranto, and Delmo 2021; Yutainten et.al. 2025). The deficit model approach situates the general public as the party that lacks science knowledge and thus is removed from actual science conversation. In return, scholars who focus on science, health, and risk issues are among those most trusted and seen credible by the public, undermining those who do not necessarily and frequently occupy a unique, direct public-facing post. Yutainten et.al. (2025) also underlined that even with the ascent of digital technology-facilitated communication, state-backed science agencies such as BRIN often resort back to controlled dialogue and limited interactive engagement in their practice of communication on digital platforms despite some progress on doubling the audience-reaching efforts.

In addition, many science communication efforts in Indonesia assume that the public lacks knowledge and simply needs to be “filled in” with correct scientific information (Besley and Tanner 2011). Yet, less meditation has been done on questioning: what is “correct?” Who authorizes and approves the correctness? To what extent the process of filling in can go? This approach overlooks the fact that local communities may have already possessed local knowledge, cultural values, and experiential world views (Ida et.al. 2025; Chatfield and Reddick 2015; Smallman, 2019; Yudarwati, Putranto, and Delmo 2021; Graf, Renner, and Klebel 2026). The Pangandaran-BPPT panic shows that community preparedness is not just about accessing and disseminating information but also about integrating local knowledge within science communication. When science communicators ignore these existing

knowledge, values, and world views, they risk alienating the public, dismissing existing knowledge, and creating resistance. The COVID-19 pandemic years also have proven that the deficit model approach is counterproductive in high-context countries like Indonesia, where citizens have more trust in information given or relayed by their family members than by outsiders or government officials (Ida et.al. 2025). Worse, scientists might also risk their safety as personal attacks on scientists were not uncommon (Lorenzoni et.al. 2025).

Overreliance on jargons

Another significant barrier to effective science communication is the persistent reliance on jargons and the reluctance to reduce their use, a pattern widely observed across scientific and governmental institutions (Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein 2012; Sharon and Baram-Tsabari 2013; Dean 2009; Martínez and Mammola 2020). In Indonesia, this tendency is particularly pronounced as science institutions often default to technical terminology, bureaucratic phrasing, and rigid formal registers that are largely inaccessible to non-specialist lay audience (Doyle et.al. 2025). Doyle et.al. also argue while it is not uncommon that lay people have often already understood the subject matter at hand, apparent confusion may still be due to “a lack of [exposure to] technical language rather than a lack of understanding” (2025). When science is positioned as having its own culture of practices, bias, and judgement, thus comes the need for a structured language to help the public articulate them all. From the Pandeglang-BPPT panic case, science communication markedly distinguish internal, for-scientists-only discourse from the public, consumable one (see “BPPT Minta Maaf,” *Tempo* 2018b).

On a formal language property level, while jargon-heavy language may serve precision and uphold institutional authority and ethos, it simultaneously alienates the broader public, who may lack the familiarity and literacy to interpret complex terminologies, such as that required to interpret probabilistic language in the use of the terms *prediksi* “prediction” and *potensi* “potential” (see “Peneliti Tsunami Pandeglang Lega,” *Tempo* 2018a). In the casual or consultative registers (based on Joos 1962) of the everyday life, the two terms may be used interchangeably by lay people; the challenge only appears when lay people cannot recognize the boundaries, or, alternatively, how porous are said boundaries, as they move through registers in science conversations.

This issue becomes especially problematic during times of crisis such as public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic or environmental disasters. In such situation, since information must be disseminated rapidly and understood clearly by diverse audience, rather than adapting their communication strategies to meet these urgent needs, institutions frequently fall back on standardized, rigid formats that prioritize completeness and formality over clarity. As a result, messages that are scientifically accurate and well-vetted may still fail to reach the public (Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein 2012; Dean 2012; Ida et.al. 2025).

Research in science communication has consistently shown that simplifying language does not necessarily mean sacrificing accuracy; instead, it can enhance comprehension and engagement by making information more relevant to everyday experiences. However, institutional cultures often discourage such practice (Yutainten et.al. 2025), viewing it as a potential threat to credibility. This reluctance reflects deeper structural and cultural norms within academia and state bureaucracy, where specialized language functions as a marker of expertise and professional identity. Consequently, efforts to translate complex ideas into accessible terms are sometimes undervalued or overlooked altogether.

Ida et.al. also discuss that the implication of controlled science communication is far-reaching (2025). When people cannot easily understand official messages, they may disengage altogether, misinterpret information, or turn to alternative sources that offer more accessible although not always reliable information. As such, it may undermine the effectiveness of science-based policies and interventions. Therefore, addressing the dominance of jargon-heavy communication is not merely a matter of stylistic or register preference; it is a critical step toward ensuring that knowledge can translate into meaningful actions.

Plurilingual accessibility via translation

Given the highly diverse and dynamic state of Indonesia, translation is not only about converting words from the preferred language of science communication, in this case English, to Indonesian, but also does it involve shifts between styles, registers, and at times even modalities. In Indonesia, institutional communication more often than not insists to remain in the formal register even when facing urgent situations that require clarity and immediacy above anything. For example, risk and disaster warnings may be issued post-translation in a highly technical language in Indonesian that is not easily understood

by communities who are more familiar and active in using local indigenous languages or certain dialects of Indonesian. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian public was exposed to terms such as “lockdown” before *karantina* “quarantine” or *pembatasan sosial* “mobility restrictions” without proper literacy of the rationale or logistic behind the implementation of said terms.

A central challenge lies then in the lack of systematic training for audience-centered translation service across sectors, including within government agencies and non-governmental organizations (Dean 2012; Rowan and Pyle 2019). Many professional translators tasked with disseminating scientific or policy information receive little to no preparation in how to adapt complex discourse for diverse linguistic and cultural audience. As a result, translations may be technically accurate but pragmatically ineffective, hence the need for crisis translation (O’Brien 2016; O’Brien and Federici 2016). Translation in this sense involves not only moving between languages—such as from English to Indonesian to local languages—but also transforming communication from formal, technical, or bureaucratic registers into forms that are immediately understandable (Alnizar and Manshur 2022; Ida et.al. 2025; Yutainten et.al. 2025).

Addressing these challenges requires a shift in how translation is conceptualized and practiced (O’Brien 2016). Rather than viewing it as a purely linguistic process, institutions must recognize translation as a core component of science communication strategy, especially in plurilingual and high-stakes environments. Investing in targeted training programs—for example, within NGOs working on disaster response or corporations involved in public outreach—can help build the capacity to translate not just words, but meanings, intentions, and actionable guidance. Ultimately, improving plurilingual accessibility through more nuanced and context-aware translation practices is essential for ensuring that scientific information reaches diverse audiences in ways that are not only understandable, but also relevant and empowering.

RESEARCH METHOD

This preliminary study adheres to the principles of qualitative and descriptive research. Since its corpora of purposive sampling remain in a work-in-progress status, this paper limits itself to the discussion of two science communication events: the Pandeglang-BPPT panic pertaining to the use of the terms *potensi* and *prediksi* in 2018 and the public confusion pertaining to the government’s distinction of the terms *mudik* and *pulang kampung* in 2020. Text analysis and close reading were employed in the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Misinterpretations of probabilistic language

Within the parameter of this paper, probabilistic language is found in the discrepancy between the terms used by scientists to address certain scientific discourse and the terms as understood by non-specialist lay people in their everyday life. Particularly, when scientists attempt to convey uncertainty, risk, and likelihood to non-specialist audience, the language is often inherently probabilistic, relying on statistical reasoning and model-based projections rather than absolute certainties. For instance, a “potential” tsunami in Pandeglang that Dr Widjo described was still perceived as an alarming “predicted” tsunami by lay people, while the COVID-19 pandemic saw a “moderate risk” in having a high mobility being dismissed as negligible. This divergence stems in part from the differences in familiarity with statistical concepts and the influence of cognitive biases. In other words, rare but vivid outcomes are often intuitively judged rather than analyzed. As a result, even carefully calibrated scientific statements can still lead to misjudgment or confusion, the way Dr Widjo’s statement, although defended and clarified by state-backed science institutions like BPPT and BMKG, was still judged “causing concerns” by law enforcement.

Compounding this problem is the challenge of communicating uncertainty itself. Scientists often emphasize uncertainty as a marker of transparency and intellectual honesty, yet the public may interpret it as a sign of unreliability. Likewise, when probabilistic statements are revised over time as new data emerge or models are updated, it can further erode public trust if changes remain perceived as inconsistency rather than refinement.

Addressing misinterpretations of probabilistic language requires more than simply providing more data or more precise terminologies. Effective communication strategies must account for how lay people process risk and uncertainty in real-world contexts. This may involve combining verbal descriptors with numerical ranges, using visual aids such as graphs, and framing probabilities in ways that are relevant to everyday experiences so that the non-specialist lay people are better equipped to interpret probabilistic information.

Culturally inappropriate framing

Culturally inappropriate framing can undermine science communication, as illustrated by the public confusion on state-sanctioned distinction between the terms *mudik* and *pulang kampung* in 2020. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government sought to minimize population movement to prevent virus transmission, particularly the large-scale migration typical of *mudik*. At the same time, it was thought to be of utmost importance that the policy did not upset one too many citizen, hence the directives for the use of language that would “calm people” (Alnizar and Manshur 2022). As the president and state apparatus set the two terms to be exclusive to one another, the Indonesian public turned to figures in linguistic authority, such as linguists and dictionaries, to consult on the issue. It was understandable that opinions differ, but a greater effect of the messaging created confusion and opened space for varied interpretations among the public. Later, it was also seen by public health specialists and medical practitioners as the government’s inability to fully commit to implement state-wide mobility restrictions (Adiprasetyo, Wibowo, and Anggia 2022), as well as undermining the credibility of science communities (Lorenzoni et.al. 2025).

The top-down linguistic distinction between *mudik* and *pulang kampung*, while perhaps intended to accommodate socioeconomic reality, ultimately reflected a misalignment between institutional framing and cultural understanding. For many Indonesians, the practical difference between the two terms was unclear at the very least and non-existent at best, as evident in the interchangeable use of both terms in the everyday life. Thus, the issue was not merely semantic but cultural: it demonstrated how failing to account for how language is actually used and understood in everyday life can disrupt the effectiveness of science communication. This public confusion case highlights the importance of culturally grounded framing that aligns scientific terminologies with public perception and use.

Poorly translated terminology

Both the Pandeglang-BPPT panic of 2018 and the *mudik-pulang kampung* confusion of 2020 stemmed from poorly translated language in use. While the former mismanaged the transfer from internal, own-community discourse to a more general public discourse, the latter showed an enactment of a heavily top-down language directives. In a way, the two events are opposites of one another: one moved from a specific, highly specialized community to a more public one, and the other from a non-standardized form of language to a standardized one. Insufficient initial explanation led to both having to provide further clarification as lay people struggled to juggle the binary categories.

In science communication, scientific uncertainty and evolving data are often not effectively reframed into accessible, scalable language. Equally pressingly, there is a lack of universally agreeable instruments of measurement for the effectiveness of science communication (Baram-Tsabari and Lewenstein 2012; Rowan and Pyle 2019). Similarly, institutional science communication frequently relies on technical or formal register of Indonesian, which does not always translate well into everyday understanding across the region. These issues reveal that mistranslation in crisis communication is not limited to conversion from a source language to a target language, but also does it include failures to adapt scientific terminology into socially and culturally intelligible forms. Without careful translation across registers, the public has a higher chance of underestimating risks, misinterpreting probabilities, or disengaging altogether. The Indonesian cases from 2018 and 2020 thus illustrate how gaps in translation can weaken the effectiveness of science communication during disaster emergencies.

CONCLUSION

Research in science communication of disasters have underscored the importance of effective communication that can connect information across institutions, levels of government, and the public. However, these flows are not simply linear. When these flows break, we are left with uneven gaps between science knowledge, science dissemination, and science literacy. Effective crisis communication, therefore, depends not only on the accuracy of the original message but also on its adaptability across contexts.

This paper ultimately argues for a greater integration of linguistic training into science communication, particularly in science communication of disasters by demonstrating how formal linguistic interrogation, paralinguistic and metalinguistic choices, and translation practices influence public perception, acception, and response to scientific knowledge. Strengthening linguistic competence in science communication is a risk-reduction imperative that can improve public trust and science literacy.

This means shifting from reactive, real-time, crisis-driven communication to continuous engagement, such as moving away from deficit model approach to participatory approaches and from jargon-heavy messaging to more accessible storytelling. It also requires investing in training and professional development of science communicators, scientists and non-scientists alike, as well as embracing plurilingual and cross-community communication strategies. Perhaps most importantly, it requires recognizing that science communication needs to go beyond merely conveying facts to a holistic process of trust-building and fostering shared understanding in society.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Complete Name : Theresia Pratiwi

Institution : Independent

Education : MFA, Creative Writing (University of Maryland, College Park); MA, Applied Linguistics (Old Dominion University)

Research Interests : translation, second language writing, environmental humanities, anthropology of food