Photo: Language workshop in Kutupalong mega camp, June 2018.

THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP:

The words that define how *majhis* are seen and understood in the Rohingya refugee response

Contact

info@translatorswithoutborders.org to discuss overall language services and resources for communicationg with communities in need

or

bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org for language needs in Bangladesh

If you are in any of the refugee camps in Ukhiya or Teknaf, you will hear the term *majhi* a lot. Its literal translation from Bangla to English is "boatman," but people from Bangladesh visiting the camps may then be surprised as these Rohingya *majhis* have little to do with boats; instead their appointed role is the sharing of official information, with some assuming a leadership role, too. Research by Translators without Borders shows, however, that the effectiveness of *majhis* as Rohingya leaders and communicators is still constrained by a lack of language resources.

The language challenges have impeded communication between Rohingya speakers and response actors since the beginning of the Rohingya response and these challenges are evident in communication between *majhis* and Site Management Support (SMS) staff. This undoubtedly impacts the *majhis'* ability to communicate information to and from the Rohingya community. The tendency of authorities and other aid providers to use Bangla and English in camp coordination meetings does not help. Although responders call on interpreters to support, they are often untrained so their lack of experience in interpreting can actually cause further challenges. Given the important role of *majhis* in relaying information to communities in the camps and the consistent criticism of them by aid providers, a better understanding of how that communication happens seems necessary.

Interviews with staff and *majhis*

For this research Translators without Borders draws on semi-structured interviews with *majhis* and SMS staff about their interactions with one another, exploring language and communication channels and challenges. Eight SMS staff and five *majhis* were interviewed. The SMS participants include team leaders, camp managers, and site management and community engagement workers. All of them have worked closely with majhis since the mass arrival of Rohingya refugees in August 2017. The five *majhis* were appointed to their roles in 2017. We asked all 13 interviewees about their roles and their daily interactions with one another, with a focus on language and communication.

Photo: Meeting in the Nyapara camp, testing messages with Rohingya refugees, May 2018.

The introduction of the *majhi* system in 1991, and its expansion in 2017

The Bangladeshi authorities first employed the "*majhi* system" during the 1991–92 influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. The military assigned the title of *majhi* to people who could act as a communication link between the Rohingya community, the Bangladeshi authorities and the organizations operating in the camps.[1]

Ten years later, in August 2017, there was a new crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people fled violence in Myanmar and crossed the border to Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi military authorities again needed to quickly identify community representatives they could engage with and the *majhi* system was significantly expanded to cover these new camps. This selection process was rushed and informal, sometimes using community consultation, most of the time not. Today, these nominated community representatives act as key intermediaries between their community and Bangladeshi government officials, police, army, Camp in Charges (CICs), and various organizations and agencies working in the response.

The *majhi*; communicator or leader?

The term *majhi* originally referred to the boat captains who ferried Rohingya people across the Naf river from Myanmar to Bangladesh in the early 1990s.[2] Bangladeshi government officials have used this term ever since for community members who are appointed to take the lead in sharing information between the Rohingya community and the authorities. Interviews for this study show that this view of their role has evolved. The most common interpretation of the term *majhi* is now "leader," but there is no consensus on how to understand the term. Interviewees described the *majhis'* role as leader, representative or a person who guides a group of people. Some said the *majhi's* role was to save lives.

Confusion about what the role entails may be rooted in the multiple origins of the word *majhi*. In Myanmar, Rohingya people use the term *majhi* to refer to someone who leads a group and assists them in every possible way. All of the SMS staff and the *majhis* who took part in this study stated that *majhi* is now the only term used to refer to a community leader in the Cox's Bazar refugee response. However in contrast to this clear definition between SMS staff and *majhis*, interviewees also noted that when community members are directly interacting with *majhis* they show respect by addressing the *majhis* with a different term: *bodda*, which means "elder brother" in Rohingya.

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[1]Humanitarianresponse.info. (2020). [online] Available at: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20180606_acaps_npm_report_camp_governance_final_0.pdf [Accessed 20 Feb. 2020].

[2]Humanitarianresponse.info. (2020). [online] Available at: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20180606_acaps_npm_report_camp_governance_final_0.pdf [Accessed 20 Feb. 2020].

Criticisms of the *majhi* system

Since the start, there has been continued criticism of the *majhi* system as a system of community focal points. In 2017 when the system was reinstated, the Protection sector conducted an investigation into the *majhi* system, highlighting significant issues in relation to their reliability. It described issues with the lack of representation, impartiality, transparency, accountability and gender inequality. It also highlighted language barriers between groups such as the refugee community and the humanitarian community.[3] Though the system was introduced as a communication bridge between the community and the authorities, exploitation of the system damages community perceptions of *majhis* themselves and of the *majhi* system.

Language barriers with non-Chittagonian speakers

None of the *majhis* interviewed for this research spoke Bangla, the main language of Bangladesh, before coming to Bangladesh, which further hampered their role of bridging communication gaps between the authorities and the Rohingya community. To compound matters, all *majhis* interviewed also noted that at the start of the 2017 influx there were very few NGO and INGO staff who even spoke the partly related language of Chittagonian, let alone Rohingya.

Almost all of the *majhis* mentioned that having Rohingya interpreters would help, which is unsurprising as the *majhis* have always preferred to use the Rohingya language when meeting camp authorities or army representatives even though they are not sure if they will be understood in that language. However, the *majhis* mentioned that CICs and army personnel also have a habit of using their preferred language, and even when they do bring Chittagonian speakers to interpret for them, Bangla is still very often used in meetings.

The cultural and contextual differences between Bangla and Rohingya increased the challenges in explaining certain things to *majhis*. The *majhis* recall times when staff members with no knowledge of Chittagonian or Rohingya facilitated meetings in Bangla (which some of the *majhis* can barely understand), with the staff members then using English terms within the sentence either for emphasis or as an alternative Bangla to help the *majhis* understand. This may be routine when they speak in Bangla, but the *majhis* have even more difficulty understanding as it adds another layer of complexity for Rohingya speakers already struggling to learn Bangla. One example was a campaign meeting about dengue fever and cholera: Staff used the English word "awareness" several times, which the *majhis* could not at the time understand. If instead they had used the Rohingya phrase ***Ushiyari zanai don yato Ushiyari gori don*** to describe the singular English concept of "awareness" during their presentation, it would have increased understanding considerably.

Using Bangla generally makes it difficult for *majhis* to follow and understand the conversations and when the authorities cannot understand the *majhis*, officials sometimes add in hand gestures. This does not always help as not all hand gestures between the two cultures translate either. Things are easier for *majhis* to understand if they can relate concepts to the Rohingya cultural context.

[3]"Protection Considerations on the 'Majhi System'." HumanitarianResponse, www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/protection-considerations-majhi-system.

Similar but different:
Problem words between Chittagonian and Rohingya

Most of the SMS staff interviewed are Chittagonian speakers and they expressed confidence that *majhis* do understand them without assistance. They also perceived the similarity between Chittagonian and Rohingya to be about 90%, whereas TWB's language assessment in 2017 estimated that there is only a 70% similarity between Chittagonian and the Rohingya language.[4] Work by TWB since 2017 has consistently shown large numbers of words and phrases which are not similar in Rohingya and Chittagonian especially in technical terminologies. This is especially the case in technical or medical fields, where Rohingya often draws from Burmese phrases whilst Chittagonian commonly draws from Bangla and English.[5] These differences in language can be problematic when SMS officers or authorities work with *majhis* to create lists of the people from the blocks or to disseminate technical or medical information, such as information about menstrual hygiene. Using the correct terminology in Rohingya and in appropriate contexts is essential for clear and accurate communication, especially when communicating about culturally sensitive topics.

In addition, even though there are basic similarities between Rohingya and Chittagonian, they have differences in tonality. Tonality is something that speakers of non-tonal languages may not be able to pick up; the changes in tonality when speaking can significantly change the meaning of words between Rohihgya and Chittagonian. If the meaning of a word is not clear to Rohingya speakers, it can lead to misunderstanding. The differences between Chittagonian and Rohingya in the use of gestures, expressions, tonality and vocabulary made it difficult for Rohingya speakers to understand what was being communicated.

The table below lists examples of words that the SMS officers and *majhis* found problematic while they were working in the camps.

English	Rohingya*	Chittagonian*
List	Serang	Talika
Oral Saline	Dessa	Saline
Plate	Botton	Bason
Menstruation	Haiz	Mashik
Teacher	Mashshab	Mashthorshab

*pronunciation transliterated into Latin characters

[4]Rohingya Zuban; Rapid Language Assessment. (n.d.). Retrieved July 12, 2020, from https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=683a58b07dba4db189297061b4f8cd40

[5]Rohingya Zuban; Rapid Language Assessment. (n.d.). Retrieved July 12, 2020, from https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=683a58b07dba4db189297061b4f8cd40

Ways to resolve the language challenges

The *majhis* often ask for language support from Rohingya volunteers within the camp such as Cyclone Preparedness volunteers, or if no Rohingya are available, from Chittagonian speakers. Rohingya volunteers are particularly helpful as they use tone and expressions which are familiar to the community and *majhis*. However, although these volunteers speak the right language, they may have not been trained in interpreting, which is a specialized communication skill. Many of them are not using any language guidance tool, such as the TWB glossary, to check their interpretations. There is therefore little in the way of checks on the accuracy of what they are interpreting.

More recently though, as *majhis* have attended more meetings and had more conversations with Bangla speakers, they have started to understand some Bangla and Chittagonian terms. There are also more service providers now who adopt Rohingya terms when speaking Chittagonian. Despite this, inconsistent adoption means that the communication challenges and potential for misunderstandings still persist.

It is clear from this research that the language challenges that exist between *majhis* and non-Rohingya-speaking SMS staff impact the *majhis'* ability to accurately communicate information to and from the community. The authorities, service providers and humanitarian organizations are aware of the linguistic challenges in the camps and are making efforts to address these, including holding coordination meetings with *majhis* in Chittagonian. While an improvement has been noted, the continued casual use of Bangla and English terminology within a sentence is still common, continuing the communication difficulties and the danger of misunderstanding and confusion. Overcoming these issues will require a continued increase in language awareness.

To help resolve these language barriers, using language tools with audio pronunciation guides like the TWB language glossary can help staff and service providers learn the right terms and tonal pronunciation. This can be aided by training for response actors in sector-specific language awareness and substantial increases in interpreter training for Rohingya volunteers.

Language is one of the main components of communication. If the language which is used is not clear and understandable enough even for the messenger to deliver the message, then it will not reach the community members either. Ensuring that *majhis* understand and are understood will significantly benefit the response as they play a central and powerful role in coordination. Still more important, it will contribute to ensuring that Rohingya community members get the information they need and that their voices are heard.