

“9-1-1 State Your *Emergencia*”

An Analysis of Participant Interaction in 9-1-1 Emergency Calls from Spanish Speakers



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Background

As communities become more multi-cultural and multi-lingual, the question must be asked: How are 9-1-1 centers handling incoming emergency calls from non-English-speaking callers? These calls present a unique challenge; rather than two participants, there is an additional element on the line that is the language interpreter bridging both sides together.

This study aimed to analyze a series of emergency calls from Spanish-speakers to find incidents of miscommunication and potentially, consider potential solutions.

Research Questions

- 1) How are **CALLERS** communicating their emergencies?
- 2) How are the details interpreted to the Call-Taker through the **LANGUAGE INTERPRETER**?
- 3).How do **CALL-TAKERS** process the information from Callers about their emergencies?

Methods

- Ethics / Permission from Department
- Data Collection: Eighteen 9-1-1 calls from Spanish-speakers during three week period
- Transcription: Unit of analysis – when the emergency is described – into both English and Spanish
- Conversational & Discourse Analysis: all three call participants' linguistic moves

1) CALLERS

Expectation: To provide quick, clear and accurate information about the emergency

Additions

Words or phrases added to Caller's original message by Interpreter
■ **55 cases** in 18 calls

Omissions

Details from the Caller not interpreted back to the Call-Taker
■ **72 cases** in 18 calls

Modifications

A replacement of the Caller's information into something else by the Interpreter
■ **49 cases** in 18 calls

All eighteen calls were handled by different professionally trained language interpreters

Describing Emergencies:

- Were **never** direct
- Narratives → Telling as a **story**
Narrative Components
 - What the caller's reporting
 - The caller's stake in it
 - Context/ How they know

When callers did not provide all three components of their narratives, call-takers asked multiple additional questions in order to understand

2) INTERPRETERS

Expectation: To be a neutral filter that changes one language into another, not to be an active participant

9-1-1 Call-Takers use information from callers to work through a specific process to determine urgency, in order to send help quickly

During the Call:

- Followed a predictable questioning pattern
- In several cases missed information during the non-English portion of the call
 - non-language related details
 - words / names in English

3) CALL-TAKERS

Expectation: To remain as engaged in a call with an interpreter, as in with any other 9-1-1 call.

Discussion

- Callers added **superfluous** details to their narratives justifying the reason for the call
- Callers and Call-takers **lean on Interpreters** assuming they can't communicate directly with one another
- Some call-takers in this study appeared to **check-out** during interpretation
 - Those **engaged** caught errors and moved more quickly through calls
- Interpreters expected to **passively echo** one language into another
 - Based on the data from this study, Interpreters **often have an impact** on how call-taker's understand caller's information

Conclusion

Findings highlight a misunderstanding of roles and expectations during these calls. Interestingly, no one participant alone did something “wrong” to hamper communication. Participants engaged without an understanding of the *other* roles, creating difficulties.

This study indicates a need for training for 1) the public in how to provide direct information to 9-1-1 personnel, 2) interpreters on the uniqueness of 9-1-1 calls how to best gather information, and 3) 9-1-1 call-takers, who need to learn strategies specific to these calls.