

Translating Documents for Community Use: Getting it Right

Australia is one of the most multicultural nations in the world. Australians come from more than 200 countries and speak over 300 languages at home.¹ The 2011 Census revealed that over 27 per cent of Australia's population was born overseas and a further 20 per cent had at least one parent born overseas. Three per cent of longer-standing migrants and a further three per cent of recently arrived migrants reported not speaking any English at all.² The United Nations Commissioner on Human Rights has stated that:

*The use of a minority language as a language of service and communication also results in better and more effective delivery of public services by improving quality of and access to health, social services, education, employment, justice, and other public services.*³

Catering for the language needs of all migrants is imperative to ensure equitable access to services, community engagement, and health and wellbeing in general. Accessing government services and navigating complex service structures can be much more demanding if English is not a person's primary language or they have low levels of English language literacy.

It is important to consider translations as an exercise which is both economically and socially beneficial.

Key points

- Merely translating documents does not address all access and equity related issues faced by people from CALD backgrounds in government service delivery. However, translated materials are important tools which provide valuable information about services to the public
- The languages which are selected for translations will depend on the purpose, audience and context of the document
- Translators employed should have a formal certification from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI)
- Raw machine translations are not appropriate for conveying information about government services, programs and policies, and present a significant risk to agencies
- Translations should be tested with a group of community members that are relevant to the target group segment, and subject matter experts who speak the language to ensure that the level of language is appropriate and cultural factors have been taken into account
- Translations can be in the form of written documents as well as audio and video content

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'The Average Australian', 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends' (April 2013), accessible at:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30April+2013>

² Ibid.

³ UN Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights, *Language Rights of Linguistic Minorities: A Practical Guide for Implementation* (Draft) (2015), 7.

Multicultural Access and Equity Policy

The Australian Government *Multicultural Access and Equity Policy: Respecting diversity. Improving responsiveness* acknowledges that government departments and agencies have an obligation to provide equitable access to services regardless of the cultural or linguistic background of clients.⁴

As an important part of their Multicultural Access and Equity obligations, agencies should ensure that translations and related quality assurance processes are adequately budgeted for when planning the delivery of programs and communication of messages to the public.

Selecting languages

When considering which languages to select for translation, it is important to identify languages where there is a high rate of 'limited English proficiency', as well as languages that are specifically relevant to the target demographic for the communications—for example women, older people aged 65 and over, recently arrived migrants or youth—rather than languages that have the largest number of speakers.⁵

Other things to consider when choosing languages for translations include:

- Census data
- Service data for the target region (e.g. which communities are requesting interpreters when accessing face-to-face services)
- The type of service and target audience (e.g. aged care services, or settlement services)
- Literacy levels of the intended audience in their own language
- Use of other translated material by the agency (consider whether these materials are used frequently or infrequently by the language group)
- Community feedback received about language services and translated materials

FECCA's report *Australia's Growing Linguistic Diversity* (2016) provides an overview of new and emerging community languages in Australia and the demand for language services.⁶

Machine Translations

With the development of modern technology, there are new options to cater for diverse populations such as the use of raw machine translations (e.g. Google Translate and Bing Translator). This technology has proven to be problematic as it is not sophisticated enough to appreciate the differences in formation of sentences in different languages. In a review of translations in the United Kingdom it was found that:

... the use of machine translations [for example, Google translate] is somewhat problematic. It is so because the translation output is not post-edited by humans. This means that the translations tend to be of low quality.⁷

⁴ See further: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/multicultural-access-and-equity>

⁵ Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, Factsheet no 6, *Translation: an introduction*, accessible at: <http://www.ceh.org.au/translation-an-introduction/>

⁶ FECCA, *Australia's Growing Linguistic Diversity: An opportunity for a strategic approach to language services policy and practice* (2016), accessible at: <http://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/feccalanguagesreport.pdf>

⁷ Gabriel Gonzalez Nunez, 'Translating in Linguistically Diverse Societies: translation policy in the United Kingdom' *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 15:1 (2016), 169.

FECCA has consulted with NAATI-accredited translators in a number of languages including Italian, Hindi, Romanian, Armenian, Japanese and French. All those consulted reported that this method does not provide a meaningful translation, and instead often provides a literal word-for-word translation that makes little or no sense. Japanese translators reported that using raw machine translations results in “grammatically inaccurate and syntactically collapsed” sentences.

When translating from English into another language, there is a concern that machine translations do not have the ability to apply the requisite linguistic intelligence and contextual relevance to the translation.⁸ For example,

- ‘ACT’ (Australian Capital Territory) is translated to mean ‘Act of Parliament’
- A machine translation of the English word ‘Corrections Officer’ to Italian produced a translated Italian word that meant rectification, adjustment, alteration, or making tests
- Terms related to personal hygiene which may require sensitivity in expression.

Often, technical terms in English do not have a direct translation into other languages. The meaning of certain terms varies depending on cultural understandings of concepts such as disability, mental health, episodic medical conditions, income and property ownership. Machine translations do not appreciate these nuances and thus translations may not make sense to readers or be appropriate for the message being communicated.

Use of machine translations to disseminate information can have adverse consequences. If the information is misleading, inaccurate or culturally inappropriate it can be costly and resource intensive to rectify, for example because of the need for the materials to be translated again or delays in service delivery. Poor translations also have the potential to cause embarrassment for the department or agency issuing the translation or may lead to a breakdown in trust with the target community.

FECCA considers raw machine translations highly inappropriate to use in circumstances where government departments and agencies are disseminating information to the general public.

Use of appropriate translators

When translating materials to other languages, it is imperative that the person translating the materials has an understanding of the relevant cultural context. Translations need to be culturally appropriate and respect cultural conventions and expectations.

For many languages commonly spoken in Australia, translators employed should at minimum have a professional level certification from NAATI.

There are certain languages where NAATI accreditation is not available. In such instances, it is advisable to use a translator with lower credentials coupled with relevant work experience. Professional translators who reside overseas can also be engaged to undertake translation work, however agencies should be careful when engaging a translator from overseas. The NAATI credential system is very unique and there are few NAATI-like systems worldwide. If you have any questions, contact NAATI directly.

⁸ Pino Migliorino , ‘The Benefits of Australia’s Linguistic Diversity: Empowering individuals, improving services, strengthening communication, in FECCA, Australian Mosaic, *Machine Translation – What are we buying?; A reflection on the past 20 years* (Issue 40, Winter 2015), 24- 26, accessible at: http://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/FECCA-Mosaic-40_LR.pdf

Certain terms can create confusion if not further clarified. For instance, 'family' in the Australian context refers to immediate family members; in some cultures the term 'family' may mean the extended family. In instances where services are provided to family members, it is vital that translators are aware of these cultural nuances to provide accurate and specific information.

FECCA recommends that departments provide a short briefing document to translators about the relevant program or policy, any key terms and their meaning within the context of the document, and the expected audience of the materials in future. This will assist translators who do not have specialist knowledge in the particular area (for example, aged care) to produce more accurate and culturally appropriate translations.

Content of translated materials

When designing the content for materials that will be translated, it is crucial to understand the target audience, for example their level of education, cultural sensitivities and reasons for accessing the service or program which the material is about.

FECCA encourages government agencies to undertake a comprehensive consultation process with community members on the content of translated documents. Forums such as these in the design of the content can be of great assistance in maximising the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of translations later.

FECCA recommends including bilingual service providers and community members in the development of a 'simple English' document which can be translated more easily into community languages. Using simple English that is less text-intensive will also be beneficial for English speakers.

Technical terminology may not easily translate into other languages and depending on the context, several words will need to be used to convey the meaning of one word. On the other hand, people reading the materials may not understand technical terminology even if it is in their own language. Direct translations can also give a different connotation and mislead the reader. Considering all of these issues, it is important to use simple language and not limit the translations by word count as translated materials can often be lengthier compared to the English version. It may also be useful to consider different methods of presentation in translated materials to simply the message and improve clarity for example a 'step by step' process, lists, flow charts or other diagrammatic presentation.

Careful consideration should also be given when deciding on the use of pictures and images to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and reflect the diversity of the client group.

The Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) recommends in its 'Translation Standards' that translations are dated, monitored, evaluated and the English text and translation are updated as part of an ongoing review program.⁹

Reviewing translations

Professional translations should be tested with a group of community members and subject matter experts who speak the language to ensure that the level of language is appropriate (i.e. not too formal or academic) and cultural factors have been taken into account. Verifying

⁹ RDNS, *Development of a translation standard to support the improvement of health literacy and provide consistent high-quality information* (2013).

the accuracy and appropriateness of the translations by including the target audience will result in a more useful product.¹⁰

FECCA strongly recommends that government agencies engage community members in reviewing professionally translated documents to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and the message conveyed is accurate and easily understood.

Limitations of translations

Translating materials into other languages addresses some barriers to accessing information about services, however there are migrants who are illiterate in their own language or have had limited education and therefore may not benefit from information in writing. As such, it is important that government agencies implement comprehensive communications campaigns using a number of mediums including ethnic print, ethnic radio and community organisations to disseminate information.

There are numerous communities with rich oral languages without a written equivalent and languages that have only recently acquired a script.¹¹ These communities will not benefit from information in written form. Translations can be in the form of written to written, as well as written to audio or video. Availability of information in audio or video formats will also benefit people with a disability.

Merely translating documents does not address all access and equity related issues faced by people from CALD backgrounds in government service delivery. However, high quality translated materials are important tools which provide valuable information about government services to the public.

Conclusion

Language services play an important role in service delivery, including translated materials. However, it is necessary to understand the importance of adhering to certain minimum standards to ensure that the translations serve their intended purpose and are appropriate for the target audience.

¹⁰ See further: Polaron, *A Guide to Community Approved Translations*, accessible at: http://polaron.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/POLARON-Language-Services_-CAT-GUIDE.pdf

¹¹ See further: Thomas Benedikter, *Language Policy and Linguistic Minorities in India* (2009), 52.