

How to work with interpreters and translators

A guide for organizations responding in emergencies

This short guide covers:

- How language services support an effective emergency response
- Key terms you'll need to know
- What to consider when contracting professional translators and interpreters
- Tips and tools for effective translation, interpreting and multilingual communication
- Further resources to support awareness and use of language support

Understanding language support can ensure more effective humanitarian communication

Interpreting and translation strengthen humanitarian action by:

- Ensuring **comprehension of key messages** about service provision and aid distribution.
- Improving **access to assistance and services** in the languages people use and understand.
- Reducing the risk of **marginalization or exclusion** due to language.
- Enabling people to **communicate with responders** about the assistance they receive.
- Improving **participation of local actors** and coordination across levels of the humanitarian system.

Even people who speak a language fluently or as their first language need support and training to translate or interpret effectively. People responding to an emergency often speak more than one language. These language skills are critical for communicating within the organization, with those who receive assistance, and with the wider humanitarian system. Yet translation and interpreting are specialist skills, and undertaking multilingual communication without proper support can lead to mistranslations, inaccuracies, confusion and frustration.

Interpreting and translation are related, but different

Interpreters and translators both transfer messages from a source language into a target language. Many also have valuable knowledge of the culture in which the languages are spoken. Yet there are some important differences:

Interpreters	Translators
Usually work with spoken language (meetings, presentations, appointments, interviews)	Usually work with written language (reports, leaflets, books, contracts, policies)
Usually interpret instantly, under intense time pressure , between two (or more) speakers	Usually translate under less intense time pressure , then deliver the translation back to you
Usually interpret with the speakers , but can also interpret remotely via phone or video	Work on their own so may not be in the same place as the people needing the translation
Prioritize the core meaning over accuracy , so they might paraphrase the original wording	Aim for a high level of accuracy and precision because they can revise and redraft their work
Often interpret without aids like dictionaries	Can use aids like dictionaries and CAT tools

Familiarize yourself with some key terms

- **Language services:** services related to language, like translation and interpreting, that require specialist knowledge or training to perform effectively
- **Language service provider (LSP):** a professional agency or company offering language services. Some LSPs specialize in specific services like legal translation
- **Source language:** the original language that the information is in
- **Target language:** the language that you need to translate or interpret into
- **Machine translation (MT):** automated translation, for instance through applications like Google Translate or DeepL
- **Computer-assisted translation (CAT) tool:** an application like Matecat that provides machine translation plus other features like building a termbase of specialist terms
- **Consecutive interpreting:** a form of interpreting where the speaker speaks in the source language, then the interpreter relays the information in the target language
- **Simultaneous interpreting:** a form of interpreting where the interpreter interprets into the target language at the same time as the speaker speaks in the source language
- **Plain language:** a style of writing designed to be clear, quick and easy to read
- **Localization:** different to the humanitarian meaning, localization in language services means adapting a translation to a specific country, region or culture

Several factors influence the cost of a translator or interpreter

Interpreters	Translators
Volume of content	- Translators are usually paid per word or per page. - Rates for a larger volume of content are often cheaper per word. - Interpreters are usually paid per hour or day.
Language pair	- More common language pairs (e.g. English-Russian) are usually cheaper than uncommon language pairs (e.g. Ukrainian-Swahili) or pairs where one or both languages are hard to source (e.g. English-Crimean Tatar). - If it is hard to source a translator who knows both your source and target language, you may need to translate into a “pivot” language first (e.g. Ukrainian-English-Swahili).
Subject matter	- Costs may be higher for content that requires knowledge of complex, specialized vocabulary and context to ensure an accurate translation, e.g. technical and legal material. - Some translators specialize in certain subjects, e.g. medical translation.
Format	Formats that are more complex than simple text, like infographics and audiovisual translation (subtitling), may incur extra costs in order to ensure the translation fits the required format
Turnaround time	- Translators will propose an estimated turnaround time when quoting. - If you need a translation more urgently, translators may charge more.
Experience	More senior translators are likely to charge more, but their experience should ensure a highly accurate, reliable product. This is important if the content is complex, sensitive, or requires specialist knowledge.
Standards and accreditation	Certification (e.g. ISO 9001 and ISO 17100) indicates the language service provider’s ability to comply with international regulations. This may include information security standards and ensuring staff have relevant qualifications.
Logistics	For in-person events such as interpreting face-to-face, you may need to cover travel or accommodation costs.

Language services may be covered by indemnity insurance. This is especially important for specialized topics such as medical and legal translation where mistranslation can have serious consequences. Language service companies typically carry professional indemnity insurance, and many freelance linguists do as well. Confirm whether translation, interpreting and other subcontracted language support is covered by your organization's or the linguist's insurance.

Effective preparation can help you get the most out of language support in emergencies

Professional translators and interpreters may not have experience working in humanitarian contexts. Discuss the aim and audience of your communication material to help them deliver a high-quality service. Offer guidance or basic training on humanitarian concepts to reduce mistranslations:

- The humanitarian principles
- International humanitarian law
- Sector-specific acronyms (e.g. WASH, RCCE, MSNA, PSEA)
- Sector-specific vocabulary (e.g. terms related to accountability and safeguarding)

Professional translators and interpreters operating in an emergency context are likely to face challenges that may influence the service they can provide. NGO staff and community members who provide informal language services are also likely to face similar challenges. These can include:

- Emotional and mental strain
- Displacement or relocation
- Barriers to being able to work smoothly, e.g. reduced office access, internet disruptions
- Sudden high demand for language services

Organizations can mitigate some of these challenges by:

- Anticipating that language support will be needed, and including this in budgeting and planning.
- Investing in in-house linguists or establishing relationships with local language service providers.
- Preparing content so it is suitable for translation.
- Providing basic training and guidance to staff who will work with translators and interpreters.
- Dedicating a specific proportion of their own staff members' time for language services if they are regularly asked to provide language support.
- Raising awareness of the critical role that translators and interpreters provide and advocating for adequate support in order to facilitate effective communication.

Some staff and community members with relevant language skills may offer their time at no or low cost in an emergency response, especially if they are personally affected. Yet this may not be sustainable long-term. More understanding and more effective planning and budgeting will help organizations sustainably build professional language services into the response where needed.

Checklist: managing a translation

Use this checklist to create a smoother workflow and a more accurate translation.

Is the source document:	Yes
• checked for spelling and grammar?	☐
• clear and easy to understand for a speaker of the source language? <i>Consider using plain language principles to make your writing even clearer.</i>	☐
• written in unambiguous, precise language that does not risk being misinterpreted?	☐
• free of idiomatic, colloquial and culturally specific expressions?	☐
• free of acronyms and abbreviations? <i>If you have to use one, use the full words the first time it is used.</i>	☐
• clean of personally identifiable or sensitive information? <i>If the document must contain these, establish a procedure to ensure confidentiality.</i>	☐
• provided in a format that makes it easy for the translator to edit the text (for example a Word document, a Google doc, or a text PDF)?	☐
Have you given the translator:	
• requirements of the end product (target language, including any specific dialects, deadlines, intended format and audience for the product)?	☐
• a focal point to contact to clarify queries about the source material?	☐
• an indication of anything that does not need to be translated, such as names?	☐
• any necessary paperwork, such as contract, code of conduct, safeguarding policy, confidentiality agreement?	☐

Consider these design issues when planning your translation:

- **No two languages work the same.** Text length, punctuation and conventions like capitalizing words in a title vary between languages. Some fonts are not available in certain languages.
- **Design isn't universal.** Translation may affect the layout of designed material. Symbols and pictures may carry different meanings - for example, ✓ means "correct" in many English-speaking cultures, but means "incorrect" in some Nordic and East Asian languages.
- **Format matters.** Provide text in editable formats (e.g. Word/Excel/PowerPoint) instead of non-editable formats (e.g. PDF, photo). If you're using a CAT tool, use simple formatting to ensure text can be picked up. Separate text from non-editable formats like graphics so it can be translated.

Consider localizing your translation to improve comprehension

Localization means adapting content to a specific country or culture. You can localize the same content in different ways. For example, content in English can be localized differently for a US American and a Nigerian audience. Language service providers often offer localization services. If translating within your organization, pay attention to these elements to create the most suitable and effective translation:

- **Text**

- **Dialect:** does spelling, vocabulary or grammar change between the standard form of the target language and the dialect your audience uses?
- **Non-translatable references:** does the text contain cultural references, idioms or contextual humor that may be unfamiliar to your audience?

- **Numbers**

- **Numerical format:** what punctuation do people use for decimals and large numbers? Is your audience more familiar with Arabic numerals (1,2,3) or another form of numerals?
- **Units of measurement:** are metric or imperial units more common? Does your audience use local units of measurement (e.g. "manzanas" for measuring farmland in Latin America)?
- **Currency:** do symbols go before or after the number? Will more people understand the value if you use the equivalent in local currency, or provide both the original and local currency?
- **Date and time:** what is the standard date format? Is the 12-hour or 24-hour format for time more common? Do you need to specify time zones?
- **Contact information:** what is the format for phone numbers and addresses?

- **Visuals**

- **Color:** do colors in your design have specific political, cultural, or religious meanings?
- **Images:** if your material includes photos or graphics of people, are they relatable to your intended audience (skin color, clothing, uniform or other indications of profession)?

Understand the benefits and risks of translation technology

Machine translation (MT) and CAT tools support, but don't replace, human language specialists.

MT is often used to support communication in an emergency because:

- It produces translations quickly.
- It's accessible online or in an app and is easy to use, even for someone unfamiliar with MT.
- Options are available free or low-cost.

But organizations should not rely on translation software to solve all language and communication issues in humanitarian settings:

- It can produce texts that are unnatural or misinterpret the source information.
- It is rarely available in marginalized languages. When it is available in these languages, quality is usually very poor.
- CAT tools take time and training to use effectively.

If you use machine translation or CAT tools, always have someone review and edit the text so you can be sure the meaning is clear, accurate and appropriate.

Tips for working effectively with interpreters

Before the interaction:

- **Complete relevant paperwork.** This may include a code of conduct, safeguarding policy, non-disclosure agreement, consent to be recorded, and contract if they are being paid.
- **Confirm logistical matters.** Agree break length and frequency. Provide refreshments if you can.
- **Provide context,** such as a meeting agenda, names of speakers and other background information.
- **Clarify specialized terms.** If you can, give the interpreter a list or glossary of specialized terms.
- **Check equipment.** If relevant, ensure a stable connection. Check acoustics, audio quality and that equipment functions. If relevant, ensure your meeting software supports simultaneous interpreting.
- **Minimize disturbances.** Interpreting requires a lot of focus. Find a quiet place with enough space for everyone to sit or stand comfortably. Turn cell phones to silent or off.
- **Agree an emergency protocol** if the interpreter suddenly needs to end the session.

During the interaction:

- **Speak slowly and pause often.** Speak slower than your natural talking speed. Pause at least every 3–4 sentences. Explain that all speakers should pause as well. Never interrupt or speak over the interpreter.
- **Use clear language.** Avoid jargon, acronyms, idioms and slang. These are hard to translate on the spot.
- **Keep the conversation natural,** Look at the person you are speaking to, not the interpreter. Use 'I' and 'you', not 'tell them'. This keeps the conversation natural and helps the interpreter remain neutral.
- **Leave enough time.** Remember that consecutive interpreting doubles the length of the interaction.

After the interaction:

- **Thank the interpreter.** It is common and polite to do so while the speakers and audience are present.
- **Debrief.** You may find that the interpreter wants to tell you something that they could not say during the meeting. They may also have cultural understanding that provides context on what a speaker said.
- **Prepare for future interpreting.** Discuss improvements for the next interaction.

Language is deeply personal, and interpreting can be highly emotional. Talking about any sensitive aspects of the task in advance with your interpreter will help them work as effectively as they can. This may include:

- Clarifying that what they interpret may not match their personal views.
- Agreeing a procedure if they need to pause or stop the interaction.
- Establishing time after the interaction to debrief about anything they found upsetting.
- Providing more breaks when the content discussed is distressing.
- Suggesting pausing or ending the interpreting if they are struggling to remain neutral or calm.
- Offering psychological support.

Effective interpreting is about more than language skills

You should never ask or expect children to interpret, even if they offer. It is a specialized skill that requires training and expertise to do effectively. It is also tiring and can also be distressing or traumatizing. Only rely on children in life-saving situations.

Factor	What to consider
Identity, group or community	• People may feel more trust and comfort towards someone of their gender or from their own community or group. • This may be even more important for sensitive discussions such as medical consultations or reporting abuse. Recommendation: Resource for interpreters of different identities.
Familiarity to the person	• Interpreters familiar to the person you are communicating with (e.g. family and friends) may help the person feel more comfortable. • They may also distort information, or add their own opinions. • Someone who has been traumatized may not want someone they know personally to interpret for them due to fear, shame or stigma. Recommendation: Ask the person who they would prefer.

Mental strain	• Interpreting is mentally very tiring. • Interpreters need to take breaks in order to continue interpreting accurately. Recommendation: Provide breaks or switch interpreters.
Logistics	• If using simultaneous interpretation, you should use two interpreters - one for each direction of the language pair. • If the meeting is longer than an hour, you will need at least two per direction. • Technical aspects (internet connection, meeting software) can be confusing. Recommendation: Plan with the interpreter. Check equipment works.
Resource efficiency	• Using the same external interpreters or hiring in-house interpreters can be more efficient in the long-term. • Better interpreting reduces the resources needed to manage miscommunications between organizations and people receiving assistance. Recommendation: Include language support in budgets.

Training on effective communication outside of language helps interpreters work

effectively. Training on recognizing and managing bias and stereotypes helps people interpret without distorting information, especially for marginalized groups. Cultural awareness training helps interpreters convey information in a clear way if unfamiliar with the speakers' cultures.

Informal interpreters can provide vital language skills but need your support to interpret properly

Informal or non-professional interpreters are people with relevant language skills who offer their language services in the moment to support communication between humanitarian responders and people needing assistance. However, in specialized contexts like medical consultations, informal interpreters without adequate training may not be able to correctly relay all the information. This can have severe consequences.

Tips for effective multilingual communication

Running multilingual meetings and providing multilingual information is about more than making information available in different languages. These tips will help organizations ensure language support provides maximum benefit:

- **Make it clear that multilingual information is available.** Start bilingual working group emails with a greeting in both languages. Provide technical instructions about language support in the audience's language. ("Here is the Ukrainian version of this document" should be written in Ukrainian, not English.) At the start of interpreted meetings, explain how to access interpretation in all languages.
- **Treat languages as equally important.** Provide meeting agendas and minutes in both languages. Provide any translations of documents (terms of reference, response plans) in a timely manner. Allow meeting participants to raise questions in the language they are most comfortable speaking.
- **Address logistical or administrative issues.** Check interpretation is working before the meeting starts. Pause the meeting to fix any issues that arise, instead of just 'giving up' on the interpreting. This will save time in the long term by helping people understand information clearly, and avoiding the need to resolve misunderstandings or answer follow-up questions. Adjust meeting length to allow time to explain how to access the interpreting. Remember that meetings will be double the length if using consecutive interpreting.
- **Encourage speakers of the less-represented language.** Assume that everyone has different levels of comfort using each language. Be aware that people who feel less comfortable using the language of the majority will need time to process the information and compose what they want to say.

Check out our other helpful resources

- CLEAR Global, [Practical tips for community interpreters](#)
- CLEAR Global/TWB, [Field guide to humanitarian interpreting and cultural mediation](#)
- CLEAR Global/TWB and OXFAM, [Six tips for humanitarians working with interpreters on sensitive topics](#)
- CLEAR Global, [What is plain language?](#)
- CLEAR Global, [Glossaries](#)

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