

## Translations That Hit The Mark

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*This brief is part of a series highlighting best practices for writing and designing outreach and enrollment materials that are clear, easy to read and understand, and that make it easier for people to enroll.*

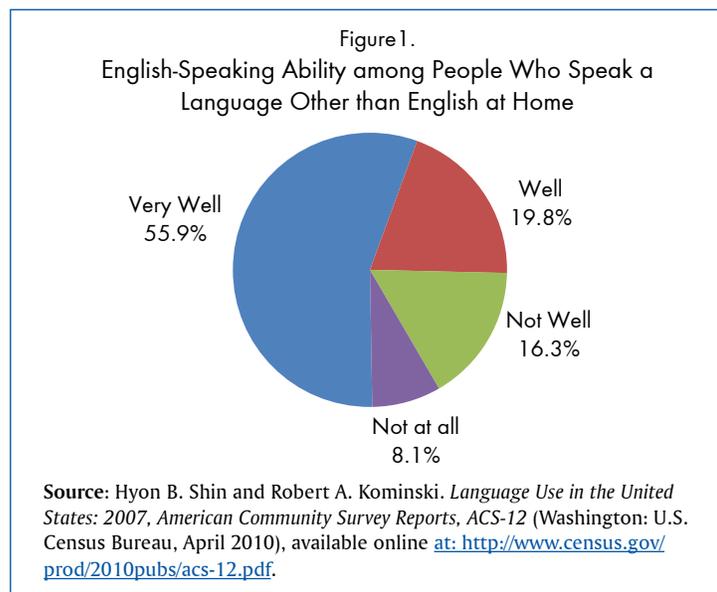
MAXIMUS  
CENTER FOR HEALTH LITERACY

Enroll America's  
Best Practices  
Institute

October 2012

## Introduction

In the United States, one-fifth of people over the age of five—55.4 million people—speak a language other than English at home.<sup>1</sup> While many of these people also speak English very well, more than 40 percent have limited or no English speaking abilities (see Figure 1). The numbers of people with limited English proficiency (LEP) and the languages they speak vary significantly from state to state, and even from city to city. Many of those who will be newly eligible for coverage in 2014 are likely to be people with limited English proficiency, particularly in larger, more racially and ethnically diverse states like California and Texas. For example, a recent report found that, without effective multilingual outreach and enrollment efforts to inform people about available coverage and assistance with the application process, language barriers could prevent an estimated 110,000 Californians with limited English proficiency from enrolling in coverage through the state's health insurance exchange.<sup>2</sup>



Enrollment stakeholders need to assess which languages outreach and enrollment materials need to be produced in to best serve their target uninsured populations. It is also critically important

to ensure that materials are developed and translated in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. Poor translations can seriously jeopardize enrollment efforts by confusing or misinforming potential enrollees, possibly resulting in mistrust among people with limited English proficiency.

This brief focuses on when and how to translate written materials into languages other than English, as well as how to ensure that you end up with high-quality translations. It also provides tips on managing the translation process.

## Discussion

### When to Translate

Translation makes communication possible among people who read or write in different languages and who have different cultural heritages. Translated documents can also improve the health literacy of new immigrants and others who are not familiar with the health care system in this country. Language barriers are not the only health literacy factors at play, of course, but people with LEP have a higher likelihood of facing communication difficulties in a health care setting due to linguistic and cultural differences.<sup>3</sup>

This guidance, issued by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Civil Rights, outlines how entities that receive federal government funds must ensure meaningful access for people with LEP. It lays out four factors that can be used to assess when materials should be translated into other languages:

1. the number or proportion of LEP people who are eligible for services or likely to be encountered by the program or grantee
2. the frequency with which LEP individuals come into contact with the program
3. the nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program
4. the resources available to the grantee or recipient and the costs<sup>4</sup>

In practice, materials must be translated for each LEP language group that constitutes 5 percent (or 1,000 people, whichever is less) or more of the population that is likely to be served by the program.<sup>5</sup>

Even if your organization is not subject to this guidance, it may be a helpful starting point for evaluating which materials to translate and what language to translate them into. Your organization or company may also be able to fill an important niche by translating materials into languages that are not required by the federal guidance. Translating materials into additional languages may provide a crucial bridge to coverage for certain non-English speakers who might otherwise never receive written outreach or enrollment materials that they can read and understand.

Also keep in mind that some cultures are less reliant on written materials. If your target population includes people from a cultural or ethnic group that relies more heavily on oral communication, you may want to prioritize providing other forms of cultural and linguistic supports, such as interpreters, above translations.

## Characteristics of a Good Translation

- **Avoid Direct Translation**

Simply knowing a language or using a bilingual dictionary to “translate” text word-for-word is not sufficient. There often are no precise equivalents for English words, phrases, or concepts, and this is certainly true of the terminology that is used to talk about health care and coverage. As a result, literal translations sometimes result in awkward language or significant errors that can completely mislead the reader.<sup>6</sup> Translation websites and “apps” are also inappropriate for translating materials, because they cannot account for context, tone, reading level, or regional differences. Although websites and apps may seem like quick, inexpensive solutions, the resulting translations are rarely accurate, and they may often be of such poor quality that they confuse or mislead your target population.

A competent translator will do much more than simply convert words to a different language: The translator will use common words that are familiar to the target audience to express the concepts. The result should be a translation that is complete and accurate—but not literal or word-for-word.

- **Consider the Source**

One way to make sure your translated materials are high-quality is to make sure the source materials are as good as they can be in English.<sup>7</sup> Most health-related source documents are written at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level or above. Making sure the translated document is written at an accessible reading level for the intended audience may require adjusting the reading level of the source document. Keep in mind that translators typically translate based on the reading level and tone of the source document. They do not automatically make adjustments to simplify the text for an LEP audience. If the translated material needs to be simplified for the LEP audience, chances are these simplifications would also benefit the audience that is reading the document in English.

If you decide your LEP audience needs the material written at a different reading level, remember to make that clear when you request the translation. Translators can work with you to adapt the content for your audience. In an adapted translation, the translator reads the document carefully to understand its content and then writes the information at a reading level that is appropriate for the audience. Because health coverage information can be quite complex, translations may require a specialized translator who has experience with translating this kind of information.

- **Strike the Right Tone**

It is also important to get the tone right. Tone is the implied attitude of the writer toward the subject and the audience. Failing to strike the right tone in a translation can alienate or mislead the reader, defeating the purpose of the translation altogether. The author's choice of words, phrasing, and images all contribute to the tone of the document. The tone might be friendly and encouraging if the document urges readers to learn new information or enroll in a health insurance plan, or the tone might be serious and authoritative if it is a legal document that explains laws or regulations.



- **Consider Format and Design**

It is important to keep formatting in mind when translating materials, because different languages require different amounts of space to express the same idea. Translators call this “text expansion.” In order to avoid crowding the page by forcing another language into the same space as the original, talk to the designer and translator and plan ahead for more space when necessary. As you can see in Figure 3, the Spanish and Russian translations take much more space than the original paragraph does in English. Make sure that applications, brochures, and websites account for text expansion, and that translated text maintains the same formatting (font size, text-to-white-space ratio, etc.) as the English version.

Figure 3. Example of Text Expansion

<b>English:</b>	<b>Spanish:</b>	<b>Russian:</b>
<p>This document can be provided upon request in alternative formats for individuals with disabilities. Other formats may include (but are not limited to) large print, Braille, audio recordings, Web-based communications and other electronic formats. Email <a href="mailto:altformat.app@state.or.us">altformat.app@state.or.us</a>, or call 1-800-699-9075 (voice) or TTY 711 to arrange for the alternative format that will work best for you. You can get this application in another language or you can get an interpreter. Call 1-800-699-9075 or TTY 711.</p>	<p>Podemos proporcionar, sobre pedido, este documento en formatos alternativos para personas con discapacidades. Estos formatos pueden ser (entre otros más) impresos en letras grandes, Braille, grabaciones de audio, comunicaciones en internet y otros formatos electrónicos. Envíe un email a <a href="mailto:altformat.app@state.or.us">altformat.app@state.or.us</a> o llame al 1-800-699-9075 o al TTY 711 para pedir el formato más conveniente para usted. También puede recibir esta solicitud en otros idiomas o puede obtener un intérprete. Llame al 1-800-699-9075 (TTY 711) para obtener la solicitud en el idioma más conveniente para usted.</p>	<p>Для лиц с ограниченными физическими возможностями мы можем предоставить этот документ в других форматах. В числе возможных форматов (помимо прочего) печать крупным шрифтом, шрифт Брайля, аудиокассеты, онлайн-сообщения и другие электронные форматы. Обратитесь по электронной почте: <a href="mailto:altformat.app@state.or.us">altformat.app@state.or.us</a> или позвоните по номеру: 1-800-699-9075 или по номеру 711 для лиц с нарушениями слуха, чтобы получить этот документ в удобном для Вас формате. Вы также можете получить этот бланк заявления в переводе на другой язык. Или Вы можете использовать услуги переводчика. Позвоните по номеру: 1-800-699-9075 (номер 711 для лиц с нарушениями слуха), чтобы выбрать наиболее удобный для Вас язык.</p>

The translator, together with others who are working on the design and layout of the translated materials, should also be aware of cultural nuances. It is important that outreach and enrollment materials include meaningful examples and appropriate images that “speak” to the target audience (see Figure 4). The use of certain colors or symbols may also carry unexpected meaning in some cultures. The translated document may require a different color scheme or layout than the source document.

Figure 4. Renewal Reminder in Spanish

Here’s an example of a Spanish language postcard with an image that doesn’t fit. A Latina adult and child would be more appropriate.

**¡No se ha comunicado con nosotros para renovar sus beneficios!**

**Es fácil renovarlos:**

- 1 **Llene** el formulario de renovación
- 2 **Fírmelo**
- 3 **Envíe por correo** el formulario de renovación a nuestras oficinas

**Si no responde a más tardar el [Date], ¡usted podría perder sus beneficios!**

## What to Look for in a Translator

Look for a translator who is a good writer, is familiar with health insurance concepts and terminology, and who knows the target audience. Ask if the translator can adapt and write in plain language—using common words, short sentences, and other strategies to improve the document’s readability. Finally, look for a translator who understands the importance of tone.

Most translators translate into their native language. Ideally, your translator should be a native speaker of the language of translation (e.g., a native Korean speaker should translate materials from other

languages into Korean). Translators should also keep in mind any regional variations that might exist among the speakers and readers of the language that the materials are being translated into, and they should strive to use neutral language that speakers from multiple regions will understand. Just as English speakers from the United States, England, and Australia use different words for the same objects and concepts, so do Spanish speakers from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Peru.

Also, remember that translators are writers, each with his or her own style. If you are sending multiple materials to be translated and they all relate to the same programs or topic, they should ideally be translated by the same person so that the writing style will be consistent and readers will not be distracted by a different style or inconsistent word choices. Another option is to contract with an editor if there are several different translators who are contributing to the same body of work. Some language services companies also include editing as part of their services.

Finally, consider contracting with a translator certified by the American Translators Association (ATA), which has developed specific standards for competence and ethics for translators in 90 countries for 24 different language combinations.<sup>9</sup> The ATA certification credential appears as the letters “CT” after the translator’s name. The ATA offers a free online directory of certified translators that can be searched by a variety of fields, including areas of specialization, language, and location (see their website at <http://www.atanet.org/onlinedirectories/>).

## Evaluating a Translation

You may feel like you have no way to assess the quality of the translations you receive if you do not speak or write the language of the translation. There are three things you can do to give your translator direction and evaluate your translator’s work:

### 1. Be Clear about Expectations

Make your expectations very clear before the work begins. For example, you might request that the translation be:

- Free of grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors
- Written at approximately a fifth grade reading level

- Written with a particular audience in mind, when applicable (if the target population is from a particular country or region, for example)
- Written with a friendly, encouraging tone

You might even ask your translator to help you develop your criteria.

It is also important to specify the format the translation is to be delivered in (Word document, pdf, etc.) and to be clear about the agreed upon payment rate. For example, will payment be based on the length of the source text or the target text?

## 2. Get a Second Opinion

Once the translator has completed a draft, you can give your list of expectations and the translated document to a different translator and ask him or her to evaluate the translation using your criteria. You can also request that the new translator translate the document back into English.<sup>10</sup> This can be a useful way to measure the quality of work by verifying that the messages and concepts you want to convey are being translated, rather than just the words (but do not expect the back-translation to mirror the original). If you are planning to work with a second translator, tell your primary translator in advance that you will do this from time to time.

## 3. Always Field Test

Finally, always conduct field testing with translated documents before producing them in large quantities. Recruit participants to read the translated document, watch them, and ask questions that are designed to elucidate whether the document communicates key messages in a reasonable amount of time. For example, after reading a brochure about the new health coverage options that are available, do the readers feel that the new coverage programs are for them? Do they feel motivated to apply? Do they trust the organization that produced the brochure? Do they understand how to apply or get help to learn more? Listen to what participants say about the translator's word choices, sentence structure, and tone, and discuss those comments with your translator.

**Tip:** When possible, collaborate with government entities that serve non-English speaking constituencies, like consulates or embassies. Most of these entities have a health and wellness unit that helps citizens abroad. These entities can sometimes give feedback and examples of materials that are currently in use in their countries.

## Conclusion

Translation is an iterative process and is more art than science. But taking the time to create high-quality translations will send a welcoming, inclusive message to people with limited English proficiency that their language limitations need not be barriers between them and enrolling in health coverage.

### Additional Resources

The Center for Health Literacy, *Translation: A Must-Have Guide* (Reston, VA: MAXIMUS, July 2010), available online at <http://www.maximus.com/sites/default/files/Translation%20A%20Must-Have%20Guide.pdf>.

National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, *American Translators Association, What's in a Word? A Guide to Understanding, Interpreting, and Translating in Health Care* (Los Angeles: National Health Law Program, 2010), available online at [http://www.healthlaw.org/images/stories/Whats\\_in\\_a\\_Word\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.healthlaw.org/images/stories/Whats_in_a_Word_Guide.pdf).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Hyon B. Shin and Robert A. Kominski, *Language Use in the United States: 2007, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-12* (Washington: Census Bureau, April 2010), available online at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acs-12.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Daphna Gans, Christina M. Kinane, Greg Watson, Dylan H. Roby, Dave Graham-Squire, Jack Needleman, Ken Jacobs, Gerald F. Kominski, David Dexter, and Ellen Wu, *Achieving Equity by Building a Bridge from Eligible to Enrolled* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, February 2012), available online at <http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/pubs/files/enrolledpbfeb2012.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Wilson, Alice Hm Chen, Kevin Grumbach, Frances Wang, and Alicia Fernandez, "Effects of Limited English Proficiency and Physician Language on Health Care Comprehension," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 20 (2005): 800–806.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights, *Guidance to Federal Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons*, available online at <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/civilrights/resources/specialtopics/lep/hhslepguidancepdf.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Everyl Macario and Rebecca Montealegre Boyte, "Translating Health Information Effectively for Latino Populations," *California Journal of Health Promotion* 6, no. 1 (2008): 128-127.

<sup>7</sup> See Enroll America's other briefs in this series to learn more about writing in plain language and designing layouts that are easy to read and understand: *An Introduction to Health Literacy and Enrollment*, *Communicating with Plain Language*, and *Design that Enhances Readability*. All briefs are available online at <http://www.enrollamerica.org>.

<sup>8</sup> Deepak Madala, *Bridging the Enrollment Gap: The Importance of Providing In-Person Assistance* (Washington: Enroll America, August 2012), available online at [http://files.www.enrollamerica.org/best-practices-institute/publications-and-resources/2012/In-Person\\_Enrollment\\_Assistance.pdf](http://files.www.enrollamerica.org/best-practices-institute/publications-and-resources/2012/In-Person_Enrollment_Assistance.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> For example, English into Spanish and Spanish into English are two different language combinations.

<sup>10</sup> This person should be a translator, not simply someone who speaks the target language or who uses an online translation program (both of which could misinterpret important specialized terminology).

## Acknowledgments

This piece was written for Enroll America by the MAXIMUS Center for Health Literacy and Jennifer Sullivan, Director of the Best Practices Institute at Enroll America.

Assistance was provided by Jessica Kendall, Outreach Director, and Rachel Klein, Executive Director, Enroll America.

Enroll America thanks the following individuals for their thoughtful review of this piece: Mara Youdelman, National Health Law Program; Oliver Vera, Communities of Color Campaign Coordinator, Oregon Healthy Kids; Paulo Pontemayor, Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum; Walter Bacak, Executive Director, American Translators Association; Virginia Perez-Santalla, Officer of the Board of Directors of the American Translators Association and Commissioner, Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters.

Enroll America thanks Families USA for their editorial and design support in the production of this piece.

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