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Language Support

Language support can be described as all the different ways of decreasing language barriers.

There are many situations and scenarios where language support will be needed, which can involve many different people as well as technology.

- **Informal** language support is very common because many people are multilingual and technology has progressed significantly in recent years.

Informal language support is provided by multilingual people who would not describe themselves as professional translators or interpreters. For example, **family** (including children), **friends**, and other **community members** will often help those who need language support.

Multilingual staff and **volunteers** within a charity will also offer their help to overcome language barriers if they can.

Language technology, such as **Google Translate**, **Microsoft Translator**, or **other automated machine software**, have become everyday tools for bridging language barriers and can be described as informal if a professional translator or interpreter is not involved in checking the results of using these tools.

It is important to acknowledge the value of informal language support because it is very helpful in many circumstances, or possibly the only option at the time. However, it is equally important to recognise the burden placed on those providing informal support because they may not have the experience or training that may be crucial for effective translation or interpreting. Also, there are some scenarios where it would be far more ethical for an unrelated or independent person to provide language support to a beneficiary.

- **Professional** language support is seen as the gold standard for communicating across languages, particularly in the business sector. Professional language services are provided by **translation and interpreting companies or agencies** and by **freelance translators and interpreters**. Professional services are the preferred solution for language barriers because they have the expertise, training, and quality controls in place to ensure effective support. Translating and interpreting is often complex and can be critical in many situations, therefore the knowledge and experience of professional services are often best placed to meet those challenges.

Did you know that **professional services include many different areas of expertise** and specialist subjects?

This knowledge and expertise can range from legal, technical, medical, and marketing to tourism and video gaming. It is helpful to learn whether a language service provider has experience in your area of work (if it is specialised) before contracting these services.

Did you know that **translators and interpreters will have different levels of experience**?

Always ask about the training and/or experience of the individual translators and interpreters you may be working with to check if these match your expectations.

Carrying out **due diligence** steps is always recommended before contracting professional language services.

People, rather than technology, are usually best placed to help with language barriers because they can better understand and adapt to individual scenarios and situations. They can proactively check if a sentence or phrase is unclear or ambiguous to make sure the meaning

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is accurately translated or interpreted. People who provide language support, either informally or professionally, will have their own levels of language proficiency with varying degrees of experience or practice of translation or interpreting. It is important to find out in advance about the levels of language proficiency and their experience of translation or interpreting to make sure these match your specific circumstances and expectations.

Language technology (also known as Automated, Machine, or Computer-Assisted Translation/Interpreting) is frequently used both inside and outside professional language services. It can provide free or low-cost language support, however it is crucial to be aware of some potential limitations of using this technology. Language technology has drastically improved for translation in recent years depending on the circumstances, but this is not yet the case for automated or machine solutions for interpreting.

Language technology, such as Google Translate, Microsoft Translator, or other automated machine software, can be very useful in some circumstances. However, there are also some limitations to be aware of:

- A. Language technology can be very accurate when translating or interpreting short and simple sentences, but it is **likely to be less accurate for specific contexts, complex concepts, and lengthy or difficult phrases**. The technology can only process the data that has been inputted into the system and will rarely reorder that information for it to make more sense – it is less likely to make intuitive connections in the same way people can. The technology uses algorithms to transform one language into another, which is mostly based on probabilities and selecting the most

frequently used words or phrases. Since **the same word can mean different things in different situations, an algorithm could select the wrong option**. For example, the word 'safe' can mean to be protected from danger or harm but it could also mean a strongbox to store valuables to prevent theft or loss.

- B. Data protection is a key consideration when using freely available technology, such as Google Translate and Microsoft Translator, because **all your data will likely be automatically added to their reference systems for the algorithms underpinning this technology**. Sharing highly **sensitive information or personal stories from beneficiaries would naturally be a concern**. Translation companies and freelancers also use language technology, but many will have access to secure and closed systems that guarantee your data is protected (always check if a secure closed system is being used if you require this level of data protection).
- C. There are also limitations around the languages the technology can support. There are **more than 6,000 spoken languages in the world today, however language technology can only support a very small number** of these. For example, language technology is most effective between European languages because they have been prolific and dominant in the digital age. **Many languages are not supported at all, while others may be less accurate simply because they have not been given the same amount of attention during technological developments**. For example, language technology has become more accurate and reliable for languages such as English, French, and Spanish in comparison with languages such as Tamil, Urdu, or Welsh.

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Initial info, signposting, and services

Professional language services carry a financial cost, but this will vary depending on the type of support you need (translation, interpreting, or audiovisual), the specific languages you need, and the level of service you choose.

The best advice regarding costs is always to request a quote from different service providers.

The cost of translation services is usually first **calculated based on the number of words the document contains** (the word count). The quote will also consider the level of difficulty or complexity of the text in order to evaluate the amount of work it will require, along with adjusting for the level of service you choose from the range on offer. For example, an information booklet about health conditions will likely include critical medical terms and explanations that would require more time and resources compared to a simple registration form or more general information often found on websites.

The cost of translation, or rates, will vary considerably for many reasons and therefore it is impossible to offer a useful indication of the potential costs. The rate per word will vary depending on the languages you need (often described as language pairs) because some languages are more easily supplied by translators compared with others. Furthermore, language service providers may offer a discounted rate for sizeable documents, along with offering a reduced rate if a particular term or phrase is repeated throughout the document. Some language service providers may even offer a special discount to charities to support their valuable work.

Another factor determining the cost of translation is the level of service you choose. Language service providers offer a range of service levels or packages to meet your needs and budget. For example, these will include more basic options such as using in-house language technology, with or without the intervention of a human translator, and will extend to premium packages that may include multiple review cycles (different translators reviewing the work) or involving specialist translators or multimedia support.

The cost of interpreting services is calculated differently from translation because it is based on the time it takes rather than the number of words that are spoken. Again, rates will vary depending on the languages you need because some are more easily supplied by interpreters compared with others. There may be additional costs for in-person interpreting, for example travel expenses and travel time. A minimum charge may be quoted if you need an interpreter for less than one hour, however you could explore virtual or remote services to find cost effective interpreting for shorter durations e.g., phone or video calls.

Informal language support also carries a cost, a hidden cost that is shouldered by those providing the language support or drawn from other resources within a charity.



For example, it is relatively common for family, friends, and other community members to help with language support, which can lead to a loss of earnings because of the time it takes to accompany the person needing their help as well as additional costs such as travel expenses.

It is not unusual for multilingual staff and volunteers to provide informal language support, but this can divert resources away from their main duties if translation and interpreting are not included within their role. Charities are aware of the need to provide training and support to staff and volunteers for all the tasks they perform, including providing language support, which also carries a financial cost to the charity.

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Initial info, signposting, and services

Finally, and significantly, we must think of the **potential emotional cost to those providing language support** because charity work can often involve highly sensitive or personal situations. Those with a personal connection to those needing language support may experience a greater emotional impact. Furthermore, staff or volunteers may also feel a greater sense of responsibility, stress, and anxiety around providing effective language support. While professional translators and interpreters are by no means protected from the emotional impact of challenging situations, they should be more experienced at managing these emotive experiences.

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Finding Support

Finding language support can be challenging because of the financial cost of professional services and the many considerations that surround informal language support. It can also be difficult to know when translation and interpreting might be needed.

Looking for language support in your local area can be fruitful. You can quickly find professional services by searching online using your location and related keywords e.g., Translation/Interpreting Company or Agency and Translator/Interpreter, and your search can be further refined by adding the language you need. The social media platform LinkedIn has also become a popular site to find professional services.

Building your knowledgebase will help your charity or community group find the support you need: 

- If you record personal details about beneficiaries or members, you could also include their preferred language and whether they feel translation and interpreting would be useful to them.
- You can learn about the languages that might connect with your charity, for example learning about what languages are most common in your local area (check with local councils and other local data) or that may link to the type of work you do by talking with your wider team about the languages they have encountered.
- You could review your publications to prioritise information and resources for translation that would be most useful to your beneficiaries.
- You can also keep a record of any internal and external contacts who can offer advice or provide language support.

Translation and interpreting use different skills, therefore professional translators may not offer interpreting services and vice versa. Only include the type of language support you need in your keyword search or when sending enquiries i.e., translation or interpreting. Check if the provider can offer translation and interpreting if you need both services. 

Due diligence is always important when searching for professional support due to the high number of language companies and freelancers across the UK and beyond. You can review their websites for credentials, policies, and links to recognised bodies or associations e.g., the [ATC](#), [CIOL](#), [ITI](#), [NRPSI](#). You can also search for testimonials and feedback from previous clients.

You may be able to find informal language support by connecting with other local organisations or groups if they have experience of working with languages, or they may be able to recommend professional services.

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A Brief Checklist

Creating a comprehensive brief is essential for matching your individual language needs with the right support. It can also help streamline conversations with professional services or other organisations.

Your Brief Checklist:

5.1 Your contact and charity details.

Begin with your contact information, the name of your charity, a website link (if applicable), and where your charity is located.

5.2 Translation (written words) or interpreting (spoken words)?

Specify if you need a Translator or an Interpreter (or both) as this will determine how language support is coordinated and who is involved.

5.3 Summary

Briefly introduce what your charity does, who it helps, and where it works to offer some initial background information.

Give a detailed summary about the written document or future interpreting session, include the title and the type of document or session e.g., advice leaflet, website content, forms, reports, interviews, support group meeting, conference call, etc.

Include a description of the content i.e., what subjects and topics are covered, and what it hopes to achieve e.g., raise awareness, appeal for support, give advice, etc.

5.4 Word count or duration

Include the number of words contained in the document for translation, or how many minutes/hours the session will likely involve for interpreting.

5.5 Languages, locations & dialects

With so many languages and dialects in our communities it is very helpful to be as precise as

possible. Please list the specific languages you need and their direction, where the languages are from, and where the language support will mostly take place.

Include the languages followed by the region and specify the direction e.g., *English (UK) to Portuguese (Brazil)*, or **English (US) to and from French (DR Congo)**. Needing both directions is most common with interpreting but follow-on translation may also be needed for replies to your emails or completed forms.

It may be important to share the location of where the language support will take place, for example whether those using the support are based in the UK or somewhere else in the world.

Be specific about the languages you need because different languages and dialects can be found in the same countries or regions. For example, in Syria you find many languages including Kurdish, Turkish, Aramaic, Armenian, and Arabic (Arabic also has many dialects depending on the region e.g., in Syria, Levantine and Mesopotamian are most common). Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is frequently used for translation, however this may be less appropriate for beneficiaries under certain circumstances. Also, check if the language being requested is the first language of those using language support because many people will use a second language to communicate more easily e.g., in the DR Congo, French is an official language and frequently used but Swahili or Lingala might be their first language.

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A Brief Checklist

5.6 Preferred deadlines or dates, times, and place

Always highlight if you need urgent translation support, or by a specific date. Alternatively, give details of the date, time, and place for interpreting.

Translation: insert Deadline Date

Interpreting: insert Date; the Meeting Time; the Meeting Place (virtual or full address); and the Number of Meetings (if future sessions will be needed).

5.7 Budget/Quote

Consider your budget for professional services as you may need to explore access to funding with your team.

There is no need to disclose your budget in the brief you send to language service providers, but it can be useful to know your budget ahead of receiving any quotes.

After carrying out your **due diligence** checks, it is best practice to request quotes from several language service providers to compare the services and costs.

**If you are unable to secure funding for language support, please contact Charity Translators for advice.*

5.8 Person-centred considerations

You will also need to mention any accessibility requirements of those using language support, which could include literacy levels, access to and knowledge of digital technologies, along with any visual or hearing impairments. These considerations help to determine the most effective solution for language support e.g., a written document may be unhelpful if literacy levels are low, or an online solution would be ineffective if there are problems with accessing or using networked devices or computers.

5.9 Files, Formats & Forward Thinking

For translation, always attach the original file in the format used to create the document (PDF, Word, PowerPoint) and ensure the file can be edited i.e., avoid sending scanned copies or files with security features.

If you expect the design and presentation to perfectly match the original version then it is important to be aware that translations will often result in changes to the size or layout of a document i.e., a translation may result in more or less words than the original or cover a different surface area depending on the language and its features (font/script). Furthermore, additional text may be needed in the translation to explain unfamiliar terms or concepts. If the format or presentation cannot be replicated or you want to use the translations in a different format in the future, then you will need to coordinate the final design and be alert to possible formatting errors or incompatibilities. Errors can occur when copying and pasting between programmes or systems, for example from a Word document into an email template or from a PDF into a social media post because some typefaces, or Fonts, are incompatible with certain languages and formatting rules can be different depending on the language.

Reviewing and editing a document before it is translated can be very helpful to look for terminology or phrases that may need to be simplified or explained for other languages and cultures, as well as providing the opportunity to add instructions to the translator on how to approach any culturally specific words or concepts. For example, could some phrases be simplified? Are there any special terms, ambiguous words, or acronyms that might need to be explained? Do you need to add guidance notes for the translator, such as using brackets for explanations of special terms? E.g., (The NHS is the National Health Service, which is free and includes doctors, hospitals, and ambulances).

For interpreting, always include full details of the topics or talking points for discussion, along with any specific terms or subjects and any available reference materials.

5.10 Reference materials

Please include all reference materials or links that could help with the translation process or interpreting session. For example, website links, style guides or glossaries, previously translated materials with their original versions, external but related links, etc.

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Top Recommendations

Knowing languages, translation, and interpreting

Get to know the specific languages, locations, and dialects of those needing translation or interpreting as these are essential for effective language support. Take every opportunity to build awareness of the languages that link with your charity and the challenges involved with translation and interpreting (linguistic, cultural, experience levels, and logistics).

Knowing who is providing the language support?

Find out as much as you can about who is providing the language support and check they have matching skills, training, or experience for your needs and expectations.

Bilingual resources?

You may need some bilingual documents with the original text and the translations shown together e.g., registration forms, email templates, or other documents that will be used by both the charity and beneficiaries. You may need to add an instruction to bilingual documents to advise which language should be used for replies or responses e.g., "please complete the form or reply in English", unless you are happy to receive information in multiple languages.

Piloting translations

Where possible, it is highly recommended to pilot all translations with one or more people who represent those

who will use the translated materials. This provides the opportunity to check the translation is fit for purpose before wider distribution. It is useful to keep in mind that readers will often have their own preferences about how words or phrases should be translated because there can be many ways of saying the same thing. It might be helpful to ask those piloting a translation to focus on whether the information is being communicated effectively.

Interpreting feedback

It is vital to get feedback from those using interpreting support and from those providing it. Feedback helps to build confidence in the effectiveness of the language support and can also help with safeguarding.

Feedback from those using interpreting support should include:

- Whether they felt comfortable during the session
- If they understood everything that was discussed
- Whether they have any questions or concerns arising from the session.

Feedback from interpreters should include:

- Whether they felt the person needing language support understood everything during the session
- If they encountered any interpreting challenges
- Whether the *pre-briefing* details were appropriate or could be improved
- Whether any safeguarding concerns or emotional impacts arose during the session.

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More info

For more information about this guide or to ask for tailored advice about the language support you need, please contact [Charity Translators](#).

Charity Translators – grassroots but global!

Charity Translators are a growing volunteer community offering language support to the charity sector.

Working with UK and international charities, the Charity Translators’ team provides advice and guidance on language support, as well as supporting translation work for charity projects.

Get in touch with Charity Translators at <https://www.charitytranslators.org/>

Association of Translation Companies

The Association of Translation Companies (ATC) is a professional membership association representing language service companies in the UK and internationally.

The ATC defines standards of excellence for language service companies by promoting quality-managed services and best practice. Its members provide translation, interpreting and other language services to charities as well as and public sector and commercial organisations across the UK and the world.

Find an ATC member at <https://atc.org.uk/member-directory/>