AI Translations in Community Advocacy: Considerations and Best Practices

As community organizations continue to face limited access to language resources—exacerbated by federal funding cuts—many have turned to artificial intelligence (AI) for translations in order to provide necessary services to the communities they serve. While AI translations have improved within recent years, they are still imperfect. **Reliance on AI translations can lead to adverse and unintended consequences**, particularly if used with interactions with the criminal legal or the immigration system.

Although we still encourage the use of certified human translators—and particularly those with cultural competency and subject matter knowledge—whenever possible, using AI at some point in the translation process may be necessary for our partners to provide accessible, in-language services. As such, our team has developed a list of best practices[1] when using AI translations in your community.

Considerations for AI translations

Accuracy of AI translations varies vastly by the languages involved and type of content being translated. Large language models (LLMs) work best for translating between high-resource languages, as the translation quality for a particular language is directly correlated to the amount of training data available in that specific language. Additionally, most tools will work better at translating content *into* rather than *from* English.

High resource languages: Languages where LLMs are trained with large sets of data (English, Chinese, Spanish, most Western-European languages like French)

Low resource: Languages where LLMs are trained with smaller sets of data (many regional dialects)

When considering the use of AI translations, know what sorts of translation tasks are more suited towards AI. Automated translation tools are optimized to translate specific phrases and formal content. In contrast, this technology struggles to translate colloquial phrases,

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slang, puns, and humor. Given limited privacy protections on most of the AI tools on the market—and especially free models—avoid translating potentially sensitive data with AI.

Translation task suited towards AI	Translation task *not* suited towards AI
Translating text from a target language into English, particular if you are just trying to understand the gist of the content	Translating culturally specific nuances, including slang, humor, etc.
Translating a list of phrases or terms	Translating sensitive information about community members (e.g., client intake forms, anything that contains personally identifiable information)
Translating concrete, straightforward instructions or statements	Translating between lower-resourced languages (e.g., translating text from Vietnamese to Arabic)

Best practices for prompting [If using a chatbot-type tool]

- Give the tool context and instructions. Before translating, let the model know the nature of the text being translated (e.g., interview transcript, voting resource). Also pre-feed or provide a glossary of recurring terms (e.g., technical jargon, names of individuals or organizations) to ensure the tool uses the same translation throughout.
- Treat translations as an iterative process and always assume the model will make mistakes. After seeing an initial translation, tell the tool any issues you observe (e.g., do not shorten sentences) and ask it to re-translate.
    - Step 1: Initial translation by tool
    - Step 2: Human review[2] to identify any major errors, re-prompt tool
    - Step 3 & beyond: Additional translation by tool; repeat steps 1-3 as necessary
    - Final step: Human post-edit (pay special attention to idioms, tone, etc.)
- Break longer texts into more manageable chunks, but still make sure each section is long enough to provide the relevant context to preserve coherence

Bottom line for AI translations

You should think of AI as a helpful *initial* tool, but passively feeding content into AI tools with no additional human oversight can result in non-sensical, sometimes even harmful translations (see below). When given the **option**, organizations should still opt for certified human translators with relevant subject matter expertise and cultural competency. If

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[2] Of course, this requires having someone who is fluent in the desired output language who can engage in this process

resource constraints make full human translation cost prohibitive, **a good compromise is using AI translation tools to draft content that is then reviewed by linguistically and culturally knowledgeable human reviewers**. Considering the capabilities of AI translations, at this point, we cannot endorse the use of these tools absent some form of human oversight.

A mistranslation cautioning against slipping on a stone path (Stone path, be careful not to fall!) turns into "fall down carefully."

A mistranslation cautioning children and the elderly against eating a particular food ("Children and the elderly please do not eat")