



Working Paper Series

## Translation matters: protocols and practices for book production in low-income and remote communities

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## Translation Matters: Protocols and Practices for Book Production in Low-Income and Remote Communities

When delivering children's books and educational resources into low-income and remote environments experiencing resource poverty, questions around how best to translate a text have a unique relevance. Emerging readers in these communities already often experience linguistic complexity, such as a disconnect between their mother tongue and the national language of education instruction (see [LFA WP 2/21](#)). Introducing poorly translated materials into the literacy education of someone who is already struggling with basic language decoding does little to improve their capacity to learn.

So, what does a 'good' translation look like? We tend to think of translation as simply swapping a word from the dictionary of one language with the same word from the dictionary of another. But, in truth, translation is underpinned by a series of complex ethical and philosophical decisions on the part of a translator as they navigate the best way to make a text comprehensible in a different cultural context. A good translation relies on deep cross-cultural knowledge, not just comprehension of the words on the page.

When it comes to book production, the risk of creating a 'bad' translation is usually mitigated by implementing structured translation protocols. These might include working only with accredited translators or using a two-step quality assurance process for language checking. But when restricted funding and/or access to qualified, experienced translators precludes best practice approaches, innovation may be required.

This Working Paper surveys academic and NGO research activities in support of LFA's approach to translation within the challenging conditions of remote and low-income communities. It summarises translation theory, best practice protocols, and the considerations of working with unstable and evolving languages.

### Good translation requires good translators

Translators and interpreters shoulder an enormous responsibility. From politics to economics, science, health and education, we rely on these people to bridge cultural divides and accurately transfer messages between communities of speakers. Beyond knowledge of more than one language, a reliable translator must possess a wealth of personal attributes around neutrality and professional conduct. Organisations that offer accreditation and endorsement for translators routinely include training in ethical codes and standards, and intercultural protocols.<sup>1</sup> An inaccurate translation can cause a deal to fall through, significant reputational damage, or international hostility. It can make a difference to a medical diagnosis or impact the outcome of a legal case.

The stakes are arguably higher in these arenas than the impacts of a poorly translated children's book, but it remains significant to consider what we mean when we talk about 'accuracy' in translations. If we

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<sup>1</sup> "NAATI Translating And Interpreting Skill Set Courses," National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.naati.com.au/services/endorsed-qualification/skill-set-courses/>.

agree that early reading experiences have an impact on identity formation, moral development, or cross-cultural understanding, in addition to literacy concerns, the 'accuracy' stakes might be quite high indeed. Why wouldn't we apply the same levels of rigour to translation of this formative material as we do to other texts?

The fact remains, however, that global iNGO education programs, and the book producers that support them, will always make compromises driven by funding limitations, human resourcing complexities, and the necessity to fast-track publication. The challenge is to aim for the highest possible level of translation accuracy within these conditions, and to understand the repercussions of underestimating its importance.

### Fidelity vs domestication: the dilemma at the heart of translation

The first step towards implementing publishing procedures that approach best practice translation within restricted conditions is understanding the mechanics of translation itself. Too often, we work on the assumption that a translator can take a series of words and replace them with equivalent words in a different language, and that, therefore, anyone who speaks two or more languages can be a translator. As we delve deeper into the process, we come to understand that 'equivalent' does not mean 'same'. To make a choice about how to translate a word, an effective translator must go far beyond understanding the word itself, towards understanding the web of connected nuances and connotations of that word. Decisions will be made about what the word means in the original text and what the word *needs to mean* in the translated text.

In the jargon of translation theory, this is the difference between 'fidelity' – that is, translating in a way that is strictly faithful to the original text – and 'domestication' or 'translating for impact', which means translating in a way that ensures the target reader will grasp the intended contextual meaning of the word in a way that is culturally relevant to them.<sup>2</sup>

For example: a translator is translating an Australian book into French. She is faced with this sentence: *Cathy was eating a Vegemite sandwich. It reminded her of childhood school lunches.*

The French reader may not know what Vegemite is, nor why it might be relevant to school lunches.

The translator's decisions will include:

- Who is the likely reader? Will it be Australian people reading the book in French, or French people learning about Australia? This impacts how much change is required.
- What is the main point of this sentence to progressing the story? Is it more valuable to retain the word 'Vegemite', to signify Australianness, or to retain the sense that the sandwich reminds the character of childhood? In which case, jam or cheese might be the better *equivalent* term.
- Is there any French word for Vegemite? If not, how will the reader interpret the word if it is left in the sentence? It might be necessary to change the sentence to provide additional context. This

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

is called 'intratextual translation'. For example: *Cathy was eating a Vegemite sandwich. The intense taste of that salty spread reminded her of her school days, when her mother always packed a sandwich just like this into her lunch box.*

- Could Vegemite be retained and translated in the text with a footnote or glossary? If so, what are the repercussions of that? Will it start to look more like a textbook than a story book, thus deterring readers?

This simplistic example highlights the complexities of translation theory and the impact translations may have on cross-cultural communication. In even the most seemingly straightforward books, for beginner readers, there are multiple decisions to be made.

Language is not exchanged, but recontextualised in the act of translation, using a range of 'cultural filters' beyond the words on the page.<sup>3</sup> Culture itself has been defined as 'a complicated network of interrelations among diverse forms and practices',<sup>4</sup> suggesting that there are myriad layers of both the author's, and the translator's, knowledge repertoires that may impact translation choices.

When it comes to children's books, we also know that readers learn best when reading books that are of high interest, particularly if they reflect the reader's own environment. In resource-poor communities, this means there is a strong appetite for diverse children's 'mirror' books (see [LFA WP 2/21](#)), with benefits to identity realisation as well as literacy. But this same positive and productive movement towards encouraging culturally diverse and culturally specific children's publishing increases the complications of translation.

## How to achieve a 'best possible' translation

With these examples in mind, it is fair to say that no translation is perfect, in that it will always undergo some degree of cultural filtering. But in a well-resourced environment, the best possible translation is realised by implementing strict translation protocols. In Australia, NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) oversees accreditation of professional translators within specified fields. Use of an accredited translator brings with it certain protections, such as their adherence to a code of ethics, which might include respecting NDAs, and approaching documents from a neutral/disinterested position. Global equivalents of NAATI accreditation drive translation protocol implementation in many organisations.

An organisational translation protocol will also stipulate checks and balances, such as implementing a two (or more) step process, so that a first translation is checked and edited by a second translator. In many cases a third grammarian will also participate, examining differences in punctuation between languages. The use of double and single quotation marks, for example, differs widely, even between British/Australian English and US English. It takes only a small grammatical transgression to make a text

<sup>3</sup> Seyyed Yahya Barkhordar and Reza Fatemi, "A Comparison between the Translation Dichotomies Suggested by Juliane House and Lawrence Venuti," *Journal of Practical Studies in Education* 1, no. 2 (October 27, 2020): 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.46809/jpse.v1i2.13>.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Venuti, "Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (n.d.): 237–62.

look or feel like a translation, rather than a natural language text; for example, a badly translated instruction manual where the individual words might be clear, but the sentence seems back to front.

For this reason, a translation protocol also often includes seeking out translators who work into their native language, rather than into an acquired language. That is, an English native speaker who also speaks French should generally only translate from French into English. Practitioners accredited in both directions exist but are by far the minority.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately the translator, and translation process, should be invisible – sitting behind a text that reads naturally, particularly in the education space.<sup>6</sup> This is generally best achieved when someone writes in their native language.

Translation of children's literature, including of educational resources, is a specialised field, requiring a deep understanding of equivalency due to the types of language commonly used in beginners' texts. Any book written for literacy purposes with a structured phonics focus or including the use of high frequency words that facilitate language acquisition (see [LFA WP 5/21](#)), will not translate easily into a different language where the sounds and common-use terms are different. The translator may need to replace a word with an entirely different word concept, rather than a simple swap, to achieve an equivalent literacy outcome.

Books that rhyme and books reliant on onomatopoeia or alliteration are further examples of children's book writing styles that do not lend themselves to straightforward, side by side, translation. Alphabet books, similarly, are unworkable (A is for Apple in English, but P is for Pomme in French), but single image thematic 'pictionaries' can work. In this way, careful editorial decisions at the manuscript stage of publishing should also form part of a protocol if translation is the longer-term goal for a new published work.<sup>7</sup>

So, with a perfect storm of complicated, culturally specific books that require accurate but fast and affordable translation, it is not surprising that global governments, iNGOs and industry partners are racing to establish scalable alternatives to traditional protocol-driven publishing.

## How do we translate at scale?

The challenge for communities with resource scarcity, and limited funding, is that best practice translation is expensive. Highly qualified contractors, and two-step processes, may add considerable cost to an education program. There are two key, scalable approaches under scrutiny at present.

### Model 1: Machine translation

Automated or 'machine translation' computer programs can translate lengthy texts within seconds, affordably or even free, making them an excellent solution for some cross-cultural communication

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<sup>5</sup> "Getting It Right - Translation" (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Inc, 2021), [https://ausit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/AUSIT\\_getting-it-right\\_translation.pdf](https://ausit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/AUSIT_getting-it-right_translation.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Delia Berlin, "Early Grades Bilingual Books: What Works and What Doesn't?," *Learning For Justice*, 2017, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/earlygrades-bilingual-books-what-works-and-what-doesnt>.

challenges. The fluency of automated translation is improving exponentially. Unfortunately, it remains flawed when it comes to figurative language, cultural nuance, and rapidly evolving languages. It is arguably easier to translate a complex legal document, where the logic and jargon are consistent, than a playful children's text that deploys figures of speech and onomatopoeia.

A UK summary report stated that, in 2020, Google Translate was deemed to excel at translating the overall meaning of a text, or very specific and isolated terminology, but fell down on anything in between.<sup>8</sup> Google research on Natural Language Generation confirmed that, despite advances, machine translation failed to 'capture the diversity of human language'.<sup>9</sup> In the literacy space, it can be argued that near enough is not good enough. Well edited, and well translated, material is essential when emerging readers are relying on books as the primary exposure points to written language.

An additional concern is the fact that of the world's approximately 6000 languages, only 109 are currently 'supported languages', meaning they are available in the most prominent automated translation software tools. These are also the world's most widely spoken languages.<sup>10</sup> For a language to gain a position on this list, there must be a wide range of texts available in that language shared online to train the translation engines. The more texts the AI can absorb, the better and more nuanced will be the machine translations. However, working in remote and low-income communities can mean working with languages that have few speakers, or for which there are few written texts, let alone written texts that are available online to be crawled by bots. Thus, human translation often remains the most feasible method in resource-poor language communities.

## Model 2: Crowd-sourced translation

The crowd sourcing translation model relies on a wiki approach, where communities of users can add or edit content. Major global ideas hub TED, and some online publishers, like the Global Digital Library, use this method. It usually involves a two-step process with volunteers providing a first pass translation and more experienced reviewers checking their work. Translation projects can be shared globally on a bespoke online platform, and turnaround times imposed, increasing productivity.

Crowd sourcing is an affordable and scalable model that meets the challenges of fast translation in restricted funding. It doesn't, however, meet many of the standard protocols required of professional translators. There is usually no ethics instruction, for example, and TED, for one, invites volunteers who are 'fluently bilingual in both source and target languages' to participate, bucking industry best practice.<sup>11</sup>

Crowd sourcing does offer the advantage of accessing available language speakers in the global diaspora. Human translation might remain the ideal, but finding those translators is not always straightforward. With a global platform, it is possible to attract translators in small language groups, or

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<sup>8</sup> "Current State Of Machine Translation," Tilti Multilingual, 2020, <https://www.tilti.co.uk/current-state-machine-translation-2020/>.

<sup>9</sup> Thibault Sellam and Ankur P. Parikh, "Evaluating Natural Language Generation with BLEURT," Google AI Blog, 2020, <https://ai.googleblog.com/2020/05/evaluating-natural-language-generation.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Current State Of Machine Translation."

<sup>11</sup> "TED Translators - Get Started," 2021, <https://www.ted.com/participate/translate/get-started>.

with specific industry expertise. Effective gatekeeping and application processes can offer some controls to translator quality. Translators Without Borders, for example, works with translation professionals in health and legal domains on a pro bono basis, including enforcing a code of conduct and providing training on translation ethics in a humanitarian context.

The biggest risk with crowd sourcing is quality assurance. Translation often results in appropriate words but inelegant grammar due to the assumption that any language speakers can be good writers in that language. The example below is from a title first written in Xhosa for an education project in Zimbabwe.<sup>12</sup> A sample from the crowd-sourced English translation reads as follows:

*Hello Sky, broad and blue. You fill the sky with the color blue.  
Hello Moon, up in the dark. You make the night not so dark.*

The English words are correct, the spelling is fine, and the story makes sense, overall, but it is clearly not a story originally written in English. This translation has been quality checked, and the title is available for use in low-income and remote education programs. The translation lacks the nuance expected of professional translation, however, which may have negative repercussions for an early language learner.

## Language evolution is an additional hurdle

An additional challenge for education and literacy-focused children's publishing is the historical linguistic complexity of many program communities. As discussed in LFA WP 21/2, many children in the world's poorest countries commence education in a language that does not match the one they speak at home. Sometimes there are nefarious reasons for this decision, but often it is driven by practical issues. For example:

- There are such small numbers of speakers of the mother tongue language that it is economically impractical to publish books or operate classrooms in that language.
- There is a community of speakers, but no agreed written language in which to produce resources.
- The language is still in formation, with dictionary creation processes in train.

Tetun, the language of Timor-Leste, is a vivid example of the latter. With an extensive history of conflict and occupation, generations of speakers have been raised and educated in Indonesian, Portuguese and regional dialects. Following independence in 2002, the government began working towards a unified, formalised, national iteration of Tetun. The orthography and grammar of the language is still developing, with a limited number of representatives endorsed by the Instituto Nacional de Linguística to verify written materials, including translations. Unsurprisingly Tetun is not yet a supported language, excluding machine translation, and volunteer translation of any text to be used for literacy development purposes still requires verification by the INL.

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<sup>12</sup> Jennie Marima, Hello (BookDash, n.d.), <https://bookdash.org/books/hello-rox-jaden-palmer-imile-wepener-jennie-marima/>.

This level of language complexity is not limited to the international arena. There is considerable push towards activities in language preservation and re-activation for Australian Aboriginal languages, where, again, very specific people in the community may hold the authority to translate the language. About 90% of Australian Indigenous languages are considered endangered.<sup>42</sup> As such, the available speakers of the language may be hard to locate, may not be text-literate, or may disagree with others in the community on spelling conventions. Once again, publishing projects in these language communities are very difficult to fast track or automate in any way, which can be a point of frustration for funders or program delivery targets.

## Conclusion

There are vast swathes of theory that consider the risk/benefit balance of translating for 'accuracy' and translating for 'impact'. In early literacy publication, domesticating for impact is usually the preferred approach, with the outcome being naturalistic writing that exposes emerging readers to appropriate spelling, grammar, and language conventions to develop strong reading foundations in the given language. This desired outcome creates an imperative for the use of superior translation protocols.

Superior translation, however, is expensive, slow, and requires access to specialised human resources. These factors may be incompatible with the requirements of a government or iNGO publishing endeavour looking for fast impact. Unfortunately, machine translation and crowd-source translation, whilst rapidly improving, are not always viable alternatives.

Library For All currently uses a two-step translation protocol, including accessing qualified translators where possible, and community consultation where formally qualified translators are not available. Ministries of Education are consulted to obtain early intervention in language verification processes, if required. Editorially, LFA's book creation process also includes a certain number of culturally mobile books that are scrutinised at the manuscript stage and edited for potential translatability (removing rhyming or phonics, for example), which complement other books that are more culturally specific. For iNGO education publishing, this represents a 'best possible' translation process within highly complex cross-cultural publishing environments. It respects the fact that quality translation is important for literacy development activities but is flexible enough to accept the intricacies of unstable and evolving languages. It remains slower than optimal, however, for fast impact goals. Ongoing research in the space continues to strive towards scalable and affordable processes that do not negatively impact quality outcomes.



## About the Working Paper Series

This Working Paper was published by Library For All as part of our evidence-based approach to the design and delivery of educational resources. Papers in this series showcase the quantitative, qualitative, and speculative research activities that inform our operations, from product development to program delivery. Read more from this series at [libraryforall.org](https://libraryforall.org).

## About the Author



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child can learn, does learn  
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