

Multilingual Public Outreach

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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ASSOCIATION OF BAY AREA GOVERNMENTS
METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION



Technical Assistance
for Local Planning
HOUSING



21 Elements

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INTRODUCTION

Running meetings and doing outreach in multiple languages is no longer a niche requirement for city planners working in local government—it is a core responsibility for those serving diverse communities.

Public hearings, planning workshops, and advisory boards increasingly bring together residents and stakeholders who do not share a single language. When multilingual needs are not thoughtfully addressed, meetings can unintentionally exclude participants, limit meaningful input, and erode public trust in local decision-making.

This guide is written for city planners and local government staff who plan, organize, and facilitate meetings where more than one language is

needed. It focuses on practical, real-world considerations such as choosing the right language access approach, working effectively with interpreters, designing inclusive agendas, and preparing materials that support understanding across languages. By treating multilingual meetings as an integral part of the planning process rather than an afterthought, local governments can foster more equitable participation and make better, more informed decisions.

INTRODUCTION

The **General Guidance** section deals with the challenge of doing outreach in a multilingual community and describes how to understand the need. **Best Practices** is a practical guide to doing bilingual outreach. It covers how to hire interpreters and work with interpreters, how to prepare for meetings, and how to troubleshoot common issues. **Tips for Specific Languages** offers insight into the unique challenges of working in various languages including Spanish, Chinese languages, Vietnamese and Tagalog.

This manual links to several outside resources including [ABAG's Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#),¹ a glossary of almost 1,000 planning terms translated into multiple languages. The translations have been researched and vetted to ensure that tricky or technical words are translated accurately.

The core idea of this guide is simple: language access will never be perfect, but following proven practices can make meetings work better for both residents and local government staff. Thoughtful planning around interpretation and translation reduces confusion, builds understanding, and improves participation.

Finally, this guide is meant to start a conversation, not end it. Some of the ideas may prompt debate or new questions, and that is a good thing. The goal is for those discussions to lead to clearer communication, better practices, and stronger working relationships between agencies, translators, interpreters, and the communities they serve.



GENERAL GUIDANCE

The Challenge

Planners who care about meaningful community participation and fair outcomes know that language access matters. When people can participate in their own language, they are more likely to trust the process and the decisions that come out of it.

With thoughtful design, engagement efforts can give everyone a real chance to speak up about issues that affect their lives. Outreach can also be shaped to reach people who are often left out—especially those facing language and digital barriers.

Reaching residents who are not fluent in English is not easy. Sometimes outreach efforts do not bring any non-English speakers into the room. Other times, even with interpreters and translated materials, participants still struggle to fully engage. When that happens, people may leave meetings feeling confused or frustrated instead of informed and empowered, making them less likely to participate again.

The risks of getting it wrong are real. Residents may attend a public hearing without access to key documents in their language. Slides might only be shown in English. Poor or inaccurate translations can seriously distort meaning—turning supportive housing into something frightening or making affordable housing sound low-quality—which can lead to opposition to projects communities actually need.

Creating a strong local approach to translation and interpretation means doing more than checking a box. When multilingual access is treated as a foundation of engagement—not an add-on—it can raise the overall quality of participation and strengthen community trust.

Understanding the Need



Recognizing who lives in our communities is the first step toward improving language access.

How Many People Need Translation/Interpretation Services and What Language Do They Speak?

Depending on the county, between nine percent and 20 percent of households in the Bay Area have no one who speaks English “very well.” Because fewer non-English speakers complete the census forms, the need is likely higher. **If outreach really is comprehensive, 10 to 20 percent of meeting attendees would need interpretation!** Investing in good interpretation and translation is essential to engagement that fully represents our communities. rvey are summarized in the appendix.

Jurisdiction staff can gather their own data as well. Question 14 of the American Community Survey asks if the person filling out the form speaks English at home. If not, it asks what language they speak and how well they speak English (Very Well, Well, Not Well or Not at All). This gives planners a sense of the scale of the need. It is summarized in Census Quick Facts, which you can find with most web

searches. The Quick Facts do not tell the exact language. In some cases, it is obvious based on local knowledge of a jurisdiction, but in others more details are needed. For the specific languages spoken, go to data.census.gov and search for “C16001, City, State,” replacing city, state with your local information. Click on the first link.



There is some variation between counties, with Marin, Solano and Sonoma having more families who speak English. This list shows the percentage of households where no one speaks English very well.

Alameda	19%	San Mateo	18%
Contra Costa	16%	Santa Clara	21%
Marin	9%	Solano	13%
Napa	14%	Sonoma	12%
San Francisco	19%		

Unfortunately, Cantonese and Mandarin are combined in the tables even though they are not mutually understandable and specific data is only available for large areas. In the Bay Area, roughly an

equal number of people speak Cantonese versus Mandarin, but the numbers vary dramatically by city. See Chinese Languages in Section III for more information.

What Parts of the World are Foreign-Born Residents From?

There is more subtlety needed than just the language. Foreign languages are not a monolith. Community members may be from a specific Country or region that has a unique vocabulary, pronunciation or tone. By understanding where community members are from, jurisdictions can shape their language strategies so the message sounds familiar and culturally appropriate.

Employing translators and interpreters from the same regions as your community members will help improve both literal and cultural understanding. Languages often have different accents, word choices and grammar depending on where the speakers are from, and this can make it hard for some interpreters and translators to convey information accurately. Cultural and class differences also shape language comprehension, so depending on the origins of local communities, translators and interpreters may need to be even more careful in choosing accessible language. In short, make it a goal to work with translators and interpreters

that share the same background as the local non-English speaking community.

In the Bay Area, this plays out most prominently in Spanish. According to the American Community Survey, approximately 99.5% of Bay Area residents born in Spanish speaking countries are from Central or South America. Less than 0.5% are from Spain. Castilian Spanish (Spanish from Spain) has different accents, word choices and even grammar. This makes it harder for people from Latin America to understand. Equally importantly, there are cultural and class differences.

Although it might seem natural to assume all Spanish speakers share a similar background, that is often not accurate. Monolingual Spanish immigrants who came to the U.S. from Latin America are more likely to be lower-income and working-class, are often Indigenous and are less used to interacting with government. This is much less often so for people from Spain. In short, if you can find a translator from Mexico or Central America, you should use them.

BEST PRACTICES

Interpretation vs. Translation



People sometimes use the words translation and interpretation interchangeably. Although they are similar, they are not the same.

Translation refers to the *written* rendering of words from one language (called the source language) into another language (called the target language).

Interpretation refers to the same concept but with *spoken* words. The two most common forms² are:

Simultaneous Interpretation

The interpreter delivers the message into the target language almost at the same time as the speaker, lagging usually only a few seconds behind. This is a common mode in virtual platforms that allow this function. In live events, simultaneous mode requires special audio transmitter/receiver equipment.

Consecutive Interpretation

The speaker, who is usually not bilingual, will speak a few sentences, then pause to give the interpreter time to repeat what was said in the target language. In other words, they alternate between the original speaker and the interpreter, without overlapping. Because the speaker and interpreter take turns talking, consecutive interpretation usually takes at least twice as long as simultaneous interpretation. It does not require special audio equipment.



Interpretation is hard! If you want to get a sense of it, listen to the news while speaking out loud and saying everything you are hearing. Now imagine doing that in another language about a technical topic! To make it even more challenging, imagine doing all that in fast forward, because languages like Spanish require 20-30% more words than English!

One other way to get a sense of how challenging simultaneous interpretation is, is to listen to an English-language version of a meeting held in another language.

If you can run the meeting or part of the meeting in another language, you probably should!



Choosing and Hiring Translators/Interpreters



Vetting New Interpreters or Translators

Running good multilingual meetings starts well before the meeting. It begins with developing a pool of qualified, vetted interpreters. Interpreters can be assessed based on a few types of training and credentials.

Some acceptable credentials would be certificates from recognized training programs, diplomas from accredited educational institutions or, even better, certifications. There are a number of certificate programs that provide a level of assurance that the person has been trained in basic interpreting skills and the applicable code of ethics. Please note that a certificate is not the same as certification. A certificate indicates someone has completed an interpreting program. Someone who successfully completes an interpreting program with a certificate or degree is generally deemed a qualified interpreter.

There are two main types of interpreter certifications in the U.S.: court interpreter (state or federal) and medical/healthcare interpreter (there are two national certifying bodies).

A certification is a good measure of an interpreter's knowledge of the profession, adherence to ethical standards, and proficiency in the skills necessary to effectively prepare for and carry out their assignments. The certification exams are rigorous and meticulous, and they have both written and oral components. These credentials are particularly important to ensure that an interpreter is more likely to act in an ethical and responsible manner, which includes refusing an assignment if it's outside of their field of knowledge, unless they know they'll be able to prepare properly. Someone who has successfully completed the interpreter certification process is deemed a certified interpreter.

Sometimes insurance requirements are an obstacle to hiring interpreters. Consider what insurance is needed given the nature of their role.

Is it important to hire qualified or certified interpreters? Either is probably fine. At a minimum, the jurisdiction should hire professional qualified interpreters with proven

experience in the subject matter. Hiring a certified interpreter ensures they have the skills necessary to interpret your meeting.

It is helpful to find someone who is familiar with housing or planning concepts, because it is hard to interpret if you do not understand the material in English. Most interpreters work in medical or legal settings or specialized fields. They may know the jargon of their specific field, but they may not know zoning or planning concepts. Imagine asking a native English speaker who has no technical expertise to give a speech about zoning or housing policy. It would be hard! Now imagine doing that in real time into a second language. In short, when hiring an interpreter, ask them about their experience with the relevant concepts

and hire someone who is familiar with those concepts if possible.

Finally, find out what regional variants the interpreter or translator is familiar with, and try to understand how compatible that is with your audience.



There are several sources for finding certified interpreters:

- The Judicial Council listing of court-certified interpreters.
- The National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters/ Certification for Healthcare Interpreters (NBCMI/CCHI) medical interpreters listing.
- The Northern California Translators Association, American Translators Association.

Alternatives to Hiring a Professional

Existing City Employees or Partner Organizations

There are special considerations if you are using an employee who is fluent in the language but not a professional interpreter. A staff member may be able to help build trust with the community, and may be more familiar with the topic of the meeting than a hired interpreter. On the other hand, interpreting requires special training and skills. Untrained interpreters may

be well-meaning but accidentally omit or change information while attempting to interpret. Bilingual staff may be more comfortable facilitating small groups than interpreting. They would naturally understand the subtleties of how your jurisdiction likes to explain things. **Staff or partners may be a good fit for presenting and facilitating, but may not have the full skillset for highly effective interpretation.**

If you must use an existing city employee or partner, do not encourage staff to interpret or present in the target language if they are not sufficiently fluent. Just because someone is bilingual does not mean they will know how to do effective simultaneous interpretation. Similarly, there are many non-English speakers who are fluent speakers but do not write well in the second language because they did not study the language in school. These people are not good candidates for important translation work. Regardless, if employing existing staff as interpreters

and translators, ensure these duties are noted in the person's work plan so they are not required to translate on top of their other job responsibilities.

In the longer term, it may be easier to train and certify bilingual planners already on your staff to be good interpreters and translators than it is to make external interpreters and translators effective communicators of planning processes. **If there are bilingual employees, consider offering to pay for an interpretation program.** If they cannot do simultaneous interpretation, consider if it is possible for them to run the meeting entirely in the target language, potentially in another room at the facility.

Family Members

Family members interpreting for each other, including children interpreting for their parents, is a staple immigrant experience in the U.S., but children and adult family members often lack the professional experience necessary to effectively interpret complex planning or bureaucratic concepts, so this type of familial interpretation is increasingly discouraged. The City of San José, for example, has decided not to allow this; instead, they offer live, over-the-phone interpretation.



Interpretation Best Practices



- Whenever possible, run the meeting or portions of the meeting in the languages of the participants, rather than communicating through interpreters.
- Hire professionals who are trained as professional interpreters.
- Hire an interpreter who speaks the languages or dialects of your residents.
- Ideally, find interpreters who are familiar with the meeting material in both English and the target languages, but at the very least ensure they are familiar with the topic in English.
- Find interpreters from the same communities or from similar backgrounds as your audience. They'll naturally understand patterns and cultural nuances in speech.
- Work hard to find trustworthy interpreters and then keep employing them.
- Remember, for simultaneous interpretation, interpreters work in teams of two to provide continuous, high-quality interpreting services. Develop an annual budget that takes this cost into account and think of it as an important investment, not just an extra expense.
- Leave a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for the interpreters to offer a language access announcement to explain how interpreting will work and the roles everyone can play in creating a multilingual space.



Talk to colleagues in other departments or jurisdictions and ask if they have providers they trust. Nonprofit sector partners are also likely to have suggestions.



[ABAG's Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#)³ has almost 1,000 commonly used planning and housing terms.



To Do Ahead of Time/Internally

- ☐ See if there is anyone on staff (including in neighboring departments) who is fluent in the target language so they can run portions of the meeting in that language (but not interpret).
- ☐ See if your jurisdiction is willing to loosen or waive insurance requirements to expand the pool of eligible interpreters.
- ☐ Talk to neighboring cities to see if they have interpreters they like.
- ☐ Try to maintain the same interpreters. Document contact information, specialty, rates, etc., so others in the department can use them.
- ☐ Offer and encourage the use of live interpretation and translation of city services. This discourages using children or other family members to interpret for their relatives. Options like live over-the-phone interpretation or scheduled drop-in hours for in-language services can help meet this need.

Logistics of Hiring an Interpreter



Typically, you will need two interpreters for most meetings. It is too taxing on the brain to expect one person to do simultaneous interpretation for too long. Generally, the interpreters trade off throughout the meeting (e.g., every 15 minutes).

In an ideal world you should have a bilingual staff person working at the sign-in table to help orient attendees as they arrive. If this is not possible and you have two interpreters, the “inactive” one may be able to help with

the sign-in table/equipment table. This is not recommended for large public meetings where members of the public will need continuous assistance. Once the meeting begins, the “inactive” interpreter should be doing quality control (listening to their colleague through the equipment), assisting as needed with terminology, and following the thread of the presentation so that when they take over the transmitter, they do so seamlessly. If they are tied up at the equipment table, they may not be able to do any of the above.

Some cities contract with companies to provide interpretation, and some work directly with a community member. There are advantages to both approaches.

Using a Translation Company

Pros:

- ✓ They may have multiple interpreters/translators in their language vendor database, so you have greater flexibility with availability, including when you need multiple interpreters/languages.
- ✓ Ideally, they can reach out to many interpreters/translators more quickly than you would be able to.
- ✓ They are more likely to have their own equipment and can adapt to bigger events more easily.
- ✓ They tend to have more streamlined billing and accounting processes.

Cons:

- ✗ If not based locally, they may not have a strong background in the languages and cultural factors of Bay Area communities.
- ✗ They may be more expensive because of administrative fees, general overhead costs, etc.
- ✗ Less of the income goes directly to the interpreters/translators.
- ✗ There may be less personal treatment and relationship building with the client; the company may not be able to adapt to the specific needs of your jurisdiction, such as providing tailored recommendations, reviewing guidance like this handbook, or developing shared glossaries, etc.
- ✗ Unless you select/interview them judiciously, you may not be guaranteed quality. If a company says they “hire certified interpreters,” it does not mean all their staff has that training, only some.

Using a Local Freelance Interpreter or Translator or Small Local Company

Pros:

- ✓ They are more likely to know the specific characteristics of the audience and be able to speak in culturally appropriate ways.
- ✓ They are more likely to be aware of local political nuances and dialects.
- ✓ They are more likely to provide a personal approach to their clients, developing shared glossaries, reviewing this handbook, etc.
- ✓ From the labor perspective, they may have more autonomy and less administrative burden than in big companies; you are also supporting a local worker.

Cons:

- ✗ They may not have the same availability as a bigger company and/or may not own their own equipment or be able to manage big events that require a lot of logistics — although many are inserted into the broader network of interpreters and can collaborate to find ways around this.
- ✗ You may have to take more care in vetting capacity and skills, especially if they do not have certification; they may have to follow up with references, examples of their work, etc.



Interpretation Pricing and Conditions

Interpreters typically charge by the hour. In 2025, prices typically range from \$100 to \$150 an hour per interpreter. Expect to pay for two interpreters for most meetings, and extra time for preparation and travel.

Pricing and conditions for interpretation often go beyond the actual time spent interpreting. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Provide sufficient advance warning for interpretation jobs** (e.g., five business days). In the case of short notice, expect a rush charge (e.g., 20%). Interpretation teams may not be able to work with the rushed deadline.
- **Include a second interpreter when interpretation goes over a given time** (e.g., a half-hour of continuous interpretation).
- **Be prepared to pay for time for setup and logistics before the start of the meeting.** Taking the time to set up and test equipment or computer programs in advance prevents challenges during the meeting. This is true for virtual as well as in-person meetings.
- **Equipment rental for in-person meetings is an additional cost to consider.** Many, but not all, local interpreters have their own equipment for rent. For large events, rental of additional equipment may be required. If the jurisdiction holds many in-person meetings, buying the equipment may be a good investment.
- **Responsibility for the functioning of equipment belongs to the owner.** This includes responsibility for ensuring that the equipment is charged, the sound quality is good, and the transmission is working.
- **Because they need to prepare for your specific meeting (e.g., to acquaint themselves with the materials and topic), freelance interpreters tend to bill for a minimum of two or three hours.** Virtual meetings may appear to require less from the interpreters, but they also call for significant preparation. You do not want someone to interpret for your meeting if they did not spend some time preparing.

Translation Pricing and Conditions

Translators typically charge by the word. Translators also have requirements that ensure they have enough time to produce a polished final product. Translators may be juggling many projects at once, so even simple translations or edits may not be easy to turn around quickly, or it may cost an additional amount to expedite a translation. Some conditions to consider:

- **Translators will often impose minimum timeframes** for different kinds of products; for example, they may require at least a week for up to 15 pages and more time for longer or more technical documents.
- **Pricing may be calculated per word** in the source language or, in cases where there is heavy formatting that requires a lot of time, the fee may be charged per hour. There may be different rates according to time requirements.

- **It is a good idea to create agreements early on** about how questions and feedback are communicated.
- **The quality of the translation and interpretation is profoundly affected by the working conditions of the people undertaking that work.** Providing adequate working conditions for translators and interpreters is an integral element of language access.



Case Study: A city in the Bay Area was hosting a meeting about a permanent supportive housing facility. The interpreter was not given an advance copy of the presentation and had to make decisions on the fly. Rather than use the correct term for supportive housing, 永久性支持性住房, they used the term 孤魂 (gū hún or literally a soul without peace, wandering, or unanchored). The interpretation was both disrespectful and did not convey the fact that it was permanent housing with support services. Not surprisingly, the community erupted in protest.



Potential Questions to Ask

General Questions

- How familiar are you with these [housing/planning/zoning] issues?
- What country or region are your accent and vocabulary from?

Interpretation Specific Questions

- What is your hourly rate?
- Will you need one or two people?
- Are you certified, and if so, through which certification program?
- What is the minimum length of engagements?
- What are your cancellation policies?
- Are there additional charges for logistics or preparation?
- Do you provide the equipment?

Translation-Specific Questions

- What do you charge?
- How much advance notice is needed? Are there surcharges when the material is needed quickly?
- Is there a minimum word count/billable amount per work order for document translations?
- Are there different charges/compensation for format-heavy documents (e.g., charging per hour rather than per word in such cases)?





Preparing for Meetings

The first step is to decide the structure of the meeting. For complex social and economic reasons, non-native speakers are less likely to show up at a meeting, especially a meeting that is primarily in English. Rather than spend the time and money planning for a multilingual meeting, it may make more sense to do pop-up events or other outreach at community fairs or places that the community regularly gathers.

Another big decision is determining whether to provide simultaneous interpretation, in-language content or a hybrid. In terms of quality and understandability, conducting the meeting in the target language is almost always better than offering simultaneous interpretation. It's also possible to do a combination. For example, a fluent Spanish speaker can read notes and review printed slides. The simultaneous interpretation can be reserved for the question-and-answer portion. Conversely, the presentation can be done in English with interpretation, followed by breakouts where a Spanish-only breakout group is led by a Spanish-speaking facilitator.

Assuming you are using an interpreter, there are several best practices to consider.

- **Interpreters should be scheduled as far ahead of time as possible.**

Additionally, it is vitally important to provide material to interpreters in advance. At a minimum, you should provide them with an agenda (even if it is tentative) and a list of all speakers, as well as their affiliations and official titles; these are often the hardest to interpret. Ideally, try to provide your interpreter with a written script of what you are going to say. Even if you provide this at the meeting instead of beforehand, it will help the interpreter provide a better interpreting experience for attendees.

- [ABAG's Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#)⁴ **has many common planning and housing terms.** Technical words are defined in English, in case the translator/interpreter does not know them and then translated into Spanish, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese and Tagalog. All of the translations have been reviewed and vetted to ensure the best choice is used. It is highly recommended that you review the glossary and flag terms that you want the interpreter to be prepared for or forward the link to them when you send the script.

- **The use of a sound system (microphones and loudspeakers) is a must for in-person meetings.** In most public meetings, interpreters will be at the back of the room or to one side, to be unobtrusive. Without a sound system, interpreters may not be able to hear participants or may have to run back and forth across the room. This could prevent interpreters from providing a full and accurate interpretation and be disruptive to the flow of the meeting.
- **Meeting planners and facilitators should schedule a conversation with the interpreters at least three days before the meeting** to go over the agenda and any meeting materials.
- **As mentioned in the prior section, it is important to reach agreements about equipment well ahead of time:** Will you be renting it from the interpreter or using your own? How many devices are required?



All the normal meeting best practices are doubly important if you want non-native English speakers to attend:

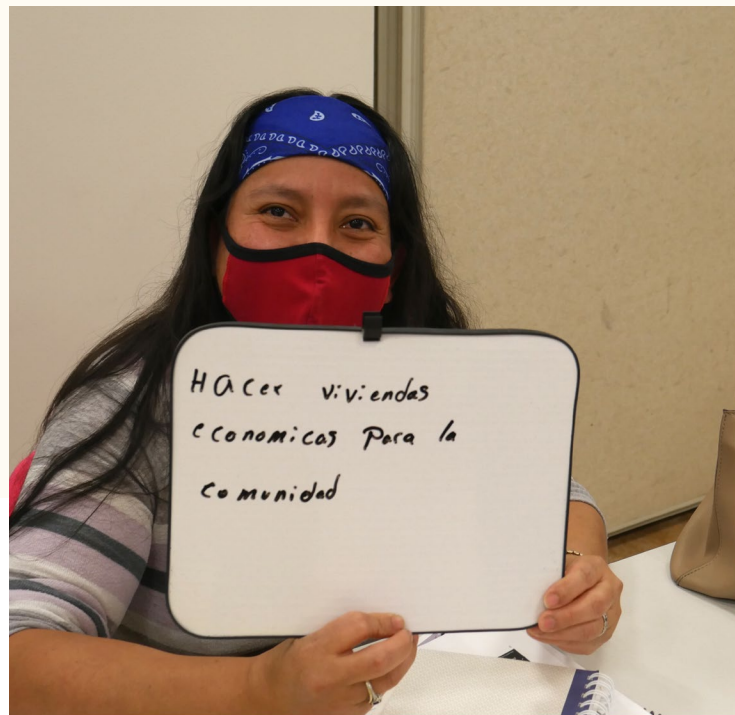
- Choose a location that is familiar and accessible.
- Choose a time that is convenient.
- Provide childcare and food.





Checklist

- ☐ Decide the format. Are there better alternatives to simultaneous interpretation? Can part of the meeting be run in the target language?
- ☐ Provide interpreters with agendas and names and affiliations of presenters. Consider requesting a translation of these materials; compensate the interpreters for this translation work.
- ☐ Provide the interpreting team with all materials to be presented or distributed during the meeting, and any background materials that may help them with cultural context and technical vocabulary.
- ☐ Review the key decisions document and the [Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#)⁵ with the interpreter.
- ☐ Ensure there is a functioning sound system in the meeting location.
- ☐ For in-person meetings, determine whether the client or interpreter will provide equipment.
- ☐ Ensure that enough equipment will be available for all monolingual participants, and encourage these participants to speak and share their perspectives through the interpreters.
- ☐ Given the duration of the meeting, ensure there are enough interpreters.
- ☐ Review ground rules, hand signals and best practices listed in this handbook.
- ☐ If the event is virtual, have a practice meeting beforehand with the interpreter, moderator(s), and other technical employees to prepare.



Conducting Meetings



A successful meeting requires good preparation, and a multilanguage meeting has many more moving parts and requires even better advance planning.

This was stressed again and again by the interpreters who contributed to this handbook. To ensure a smooth and inclusive experience for interpreters and audience members, dedicate time ahead of a meeting to the following preparation.

There are a handful of things that are most likely to go wrong:

- **Equipment problems—** Be sure to have equipment tested at least a day before, which will give you enough time to pivot if there are any issues. Also, interpreters should arrive early enough to test the equipment at the venue (to see if there are any pillars that interfere with reception, find the best spot from which to interpret, etc.). Ensure there is enough equipment for everyone.
- **Speakers talk too quickly—** Quality interpretation takes time as interpreters have to listen to speakers, take notes, translate concepts, and convey information very quickly in the moment. Talk with your speakers about how much content they can realistically review at a moderate pace in the time allotted. Additionally, it's important to have a way for the interpreter to signal to the speaker that they need to slow down. A colored sheet of paper or an agreed-upon hand signal are two easy, nondisruptive ways of doing this. It is highly recommended to have a bell or chime in case the speaker does not notice the visual reminder.
- **Written material is not translated—** Many speakers are accustomed to finishing their slides the day before the presentation. This does not work when they need to be translated. It is important to be very clear about the deadline and that the deadline is firm because of the need for translation. Something else to keep in mind is making sure to use graphic elements that can be translated, particularly if these are important to your audience across both languages.

Bilingual Slides

There are a few ways to do bilingual slides. All of them have pros and cons.

Both languages on each slide

If you do this, plan to make the slide deck bilingual before you start doing design. Otherwise, the layout will not work. Use only half of the slide for the English content and leave the other half for the translation team to add the translation. You may have to redistribute content across more slides so that you can have enough room for multiple languages on every slide. The advantages of this are that there is only one presentation and fewer moving pieces. There are two disadvantages. Often the slides will look text-dense and not visually appealing. Additionally, in 2026 it is currently not possible to have slides be accessible to screen readers and bilingual. Screen readers require every slide to have one and only one title. That title must be coded as one and only one language.

Two projectors, one with each language

If the facility allows, it is possible to have two projectors, one showing the slides in English and one showing the slides in the target language. This solves the layout and accessibility problems of bilingual slides, but adds complexity at meetings. Additionally, not all facilities have two screens or space for two projectors.

Using handouts for the slides in the second language

It is possible to have the projected slides in English and give non-English speakers a handout. This solves the layout, accessibility and technology challenges, but makes it more complicated for non-English speakers to follow along. If doing this, it is very important to have prominent page numbering.



1 What are we talking about when we talk about displacement?
¿De qué estamos hablando cuando hablamos del desplazamiento?

Forms of displacement
Formas de desplazamiento

Factors that drive displacement
Factores que impulsan el desplazamiento



Let's start with Protection...
Empecemos con la Protección...

Creating more housing will take time. Many current residents are facing displacement pressures today.
Crear más viviendas llevará tiempo. Muchos de los residentes actuales se enfrentan hoy a presiones de desplazamiento.

And sometimes they are displaced by the new, higher density housing being built in our communities.
Y a veces se ven desplazados por las nuevas viviendas de mayor densidad que se construyen en nuestras comunidades.






Checklist: Before the Meeting

- ☐ If it is an in-person meeting, audio and interpretation equipment should be tested beforehand. If it is virtual, join with your interpreting team and presenters at least 30 minutes early to ensure that the interpretation function is working and that all speakers have good connectivity and sound. If your virtual meeting is a webinar, consider doing a practice webinar a few days earlier so that you can work out any technical issues ahead of time.
- ☐ If meeting in person, test room acoustics, interpreter placement and microphone placement.
- ☐ Ensure there is enough audio equipment for everyone who is a monolingual speaker.
- ☐ If a meeting is hybrid with presenters, staff, interpreters and members of the public participating both in person and online, it's important to understand which technology components you'll need to connect and how they work together to have everyone hear each other clearly.
- ☐ Send slides, the agenda, the [Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#),⁶ and speaking points to the interpreter ahead of time.
- ☐ Remind all speakers — especially guests who are not part of your team — of the best practices for working with interpreters (below) ahead of time so they have time to prepare bilingual materials early and to practice presenting at a more moderate pace. Discuss the mechanism for the interpreter to ask speakers to slow down (a chime and/or a piece of paper, or a hand signal).
- ☐ Written materials and visual aids should be translated into any languages the meeting will be available in. Decide if there will be one bilingual slide deck, two projectors with separate decks in different languages or handouts of the slides that are not in English.
- ☐ Include language access and interpretation announcements as part of the meeting agenda. Give this announcement at the very top of the meeting to make sure everyone is set up for a bilingual event before you dive in.
- ☐ Depending on the language, discuss whether the interpreter will use the formal or informal forms of address, and gender-inclusive or traditional word choice.



Checklist: During the Meeting

- ☐ Have a target-language speaker at the sign-in table/interpretation equipment table. Ideally people should be able to sign in and get their equipment at the same location.
- ☐ Speak at a moderate pace, not too fast or too slow. Make it a practice to pause briefly before advancing slides.
- ☐ Speak directly to your fellow participants; there's no need to look at the interpreters.
- ☐ Use a sound system. If for some reason there's an equipment malfunction, speak in a loud voice so you can be heard clearly across the room. Speaking at a moderate pace will be even more important if this is the case.
- ☐ Ensure one person talks at a time; interpreters can't choose which one to interpret for.
- ☐ If folks start talking too fast or too quietly, use a chime, a piece of paper or hand signals to let them know to slow down or speak up.



Checklist: After the Meeting

- ☐ Have a target-language evaluation form that asks specific questions about the quality of the interpretation.

Working With Translators



Although there are fewer moving parts in translation, a good workflow goes a long way in ensuring success, particularly when working on deadlines and in developing public-facing materials.

Some simple things — such as making sure that you are submitting final drafts rather than making corrections after sharing them with translators — are often the hardest to accomplish.



Checklist

- ☐ Use this handbook, the [Multilingual Planning and Housing Glossary](#)⁷ and other resources to identify general translation guidelines ahead of time and share these with new translators. Set compensated time aside to review these with translators when working together for the first time.
- ☐ Ensure the translation piece is complete before submitting it. If changes are made after the fact, make sure such changes are noted and compensated for.
- ☐ Come up with a review protocol. Translators may leave comments or questions when submitting a first draft of the translation. Identify personnel — who are, ideally, bilingual — responsible for responding to these questions and making decisions.
- ☐ Have a bilingual staff person review the translation.



General Considerations

- **Be conscious of the limitations of technology.** For document or website translation, if you're using automated or AI translation methods, be sure to check the results with a native speaker before publishing. For simultaneous interpretation, be aware that third-party software will almost certainly result in some inaccuracies, especially when it comes to jargon. Bear the digital divide in mind: Virtual events may not represent the whole community, and online platforms might be difficult for some residents to access. For example, Spanish speakers in the U.S. are much more likely to get the internet through their phones than through a computer.⁸
- **Consider using nonverbal communication to enhance understanding.** There are many different levels of literacy and kinds of communicators and learners in every audience, regardless of language. Consider incorporating games and tactile activities into your agenda. Make sure visual materials include diagrams, icons, images, renderings and examples.
- **Explain jargon and technical terms in context when necessary.** The direct translation of a term may not be the most useful, and some technical terms should just be explained in context. Have a short explanation prepared that reflects the context of the relevant community. For example, instead of illustrating "live/work" with a loft building, consider using a sewing machine in a garage. Instead of directly translating "inclusionary zoning," consider saying "requirement to include 20% affordable apartments." This can be useful in any language.
- **Familiarize yourself with differences in region and dialect.** Try to get as precise an understanding of the demographics of your community as you can. Residents of the Bay Area come from many countries and a variety of regions and backgrounds within those countries, and each has their own regional vocabularies and grammatical tendencies. Use the resources available in the Census and in your community – community-based organizations, neighborhood groups and others – to determine

appropriate language or dialect needs.

Although this text provides a useful resource for translators and interpreters working in planning topics, ultimately every community and context is slightly different. Providing language accessibility ultimately means responding to the specific context (what translators call “localization”) in terms of the composition of the

community, the kind of interaction and the tone of the encounters, among other factors. Although it requires an additional investment in time (and possibly money), it is very useful for stakeholders, clients and translators/interpreters to build a glossary together. That is the best way to guarantee that the language used is culturally appropriate and understood among all parties.

Orient Toward Language Access



- **Decenter English.** Reconsider how you think about interpretation and translation. This will not go well if the point is only to transmit knowledge from English speakers to listeners in other languages. Instead, if most of the meeting attendees will be monolingual Spanish audience members, have the main speakers deliver their comments in Spanish, have English interpretation and give the English speakers the headsets. If the audience is truly bilingual, have speakers given equal time in English and Spanish. If people giving testimony have a time limit, double it for those requiring interpretation.
- **Make language access a prerequisite rather than an afterthought.** Language access is a valuable tool for addressing historic patterns of exclusion in our communities. Creating language access requires prioritizing inclusion at every step of the public participation process, beyond just the specific moment of hiring an interpreter or translator.

Use of Artificial Intelligence



- **Double check your jurisdiction policies about AI.** Ensure that you are following them. If they are not explicit, ask for clarification.
- **Use AI as a tool, not a replacement.** AI can help translators work more efficiently, but human expertise is still needed to ensure accuracy, appropriate context and cultural nuance.
- **Consider limitations and risks.** AI struggles with complex language, live interpretation and sensitive contexts such as healthcare and court and immigration cases, where small errors can have serious consequences.
- **Use transparency and best practices.** Clearly state when AI is used, include disclaimers for AI-generated translations, and credit human translators in professional materials to maintain trust and reliability.

Before even considering the use of AI, consult your jurisdiction's guidelines. The use of AI in translation and interpretation is growing rapidly. In many ways, this shift has been happening for years — interpreters and translators have been incorporating the

use of these tools into their workflows to improve efficiency, test alternative translations and complement their knowledge. However, AI-generated translations still require human expertise to refine and adapt them for different contexts. Professional translators must carefully review every word and sentence to ensure the final translation is accurate and appropriate for its intended audience.

Government agencies and organizations are increasingly turning to AI-driven translation services to reduce costs and speed up processing. Although this has clear advantages, language is complex, nuanced and deeply tied to cultural and political meanings — something even the most advanced AI struggles to fully grasp. Additionally, AI-driven translations tend to default to a commonly spoken dialect, which may not be the language variant spoken by most Bay Area speakers of the target language. In live interpretation, AI also fails to capture nonverbal communication, adjust to different audiences and show other forms of responsiveness that an interpreter provides. In critical situations — such as in asylum applications⁹ or healthcare contexts¹⁰

— even small errors in translation can have serious consequences, sometimes affecting people’s safety and well-being.

Jurisdiction staff must determine appropriate contexts and uses for AI in accordance with jurisdiction rules. A key issue is ensuring transparency when AI is used for translation. Many government websites offer multiple language options, sometimes featuring Google Translate or other AI-based tools. When AI translations are clearly labeled, users know what to expect in terms of quality. However, when

translations appear to be official but are actually AI-generated, it can create confusion and uncertainty about their accuracy and reliability.

For interpreters and translators, this can be particularly challenging when working with official documents or government information. AI-generated translations sometimes appear in unexpected places, making it unclear whether a particular term is an officially endorsed translation or just an AI suggestion.



AI Translation Checklist

Although AI can be a valuable tool, it is most effective when used alongside human expertise rather than as a full replacement. To ensure clarity, jurisdictions should:

- ☐ Clearly state when AI is used for translations, ideally on a dedicated page explaining the process.
- ☐ Have all AI translations reviewed by trained reviewers with native or native-like language proficiency.
- ☐ Include a disclaimer in footnotes or website sections if AI-generated translations are used.
- ☐ Acknowledge human translators in longer documents or publications where professional translation was involved.

TIPS FOR SPECIFIC LANGUAGES

Spanish

Two issues that frequently arise when working with Spanish are how to handle gendered language and whether to use the formal or informal voice.

How to Handle Gendered Language

Gender-Inclusive Language

- **Prioritize accessibility and clarity.** Use gender-inclusive strategies that audiences widely understand, such as collective neutral terms (e.g., “la población”) or gender pairings (“las y los trabajadores”).
- **Balance inclusivity with audience awareness.** Avoid gender-inclusive forms that are polarizing (e.g., “Latinx, Latines, Latin@”) unless there is reason to include them.
- **Use open communication and context-specific choices.** Because

gender-inclusive language use is culturally and politically sensitive, always discuss strategies with interpreters and translators.

Spanish is a gendered language, meaning every noun, from the table (la mesa) to the bridge (el puente) is either masculine or feminine. Adjectives are also gendered, with different versions of the word for men or women.

Additionally, Spanish grammar follows a masculine default rule, which means that when referring to a mixed-gender group, the masculine form is used.

For instance, a group of 50 women is referred to as “ellas”, but if just one man is added, the accepted form becomes “ellos”. Similarly, when referring to people in professions or social roles, the masculine plural is standard, e.g. “los propietarios” (the homeowners)

Several strategies have been proposed to make Spanish more inclusive. All these strategies have pros and cons.

- **Using collective, non-gendered terms rather than the masculine plural**, rephrase the sentence to avoid the issue. For example, “la población” (“the population”) instead of “los habitantes” (“the inhabitants”) or “el personal” (“the staff”) instead of “los trabajadores” (“the workers”). This is generally a safe strategy.
- **Explicitly including both masculine and feminine forms** in phrases such as “las y los trabajadores” (“women and men workers”) or “buenos días a todos y todas” (“good morning to all men and all women”). This strategy is safe but can be time consuming. It is often too slow for use throughout a speech.
- **Using gendered pairings in written forms**, particularly in official documents or applications (“Propietario/a.” This is a style choice that is widely accepted.
- **Neutralizing gendered words** by replacing the traditional masculine (-o) and feminine (-a) endings with alternatives such as -x, -e, or -@. For example, instead of “Latino” (masculine generic), some use “Latinx”, “Latines”, or “Latin@”. While this choice is common, it is fraught. The challenge is that both choices, to alter the language or keep the gendered language, risk offending people.
 - An example in English might be niece and nephew. The language does not work if the child is non-binary. Because alternatives like nibling are not widely known, using them may confuse some audiences and may distract from the overall message. It is not to say you should never use it, but it is important to be thoughtful.
 - Non-gendered language is generally more popular with certain groups (younger, American born, more educated, more progressive). These demographics often are the people doing the translation or making decisions; hence they often choose to use the inclusive language. However, most of the people in need of language access are of a different demographic. They are likely to

be older and to have grown up in Mexico or Central America, where ways of life tend to be more traditional. For them, the non-traditional gender-neutral language is often off-putting and feels as if there is a political agenda. It is a safer choice to use traditional, gendered language when talking or writing for this audience. In this way, somewhat

ironically, it is less likely to raise concerns to say Latino/a/e/x when writing in English for English speakers than doing the equivalent translation into Spanish.

Regardless, work with your translator or interpreter. Ask them what language is least likely to offend the audience.

Whether to Use The Formal or Informal

- **Err on the side of formality.** When in doubt, using “usted” is safer, because it conveys respect and is less likely to offend, while “tú” can sometimes feel too informal or inappropriate.
- **Adapt to tone and context.** In friendly, engaging materials such as social media or outreach campaigns, “tú” may be more effective, while formal settings call for “usted”.
- **Consult for clarity.** Because usage varies by culture, country and audience, it’s best to discuss preferences with interpreters to ensure the most appropriate choice.

In English, there is not a bright-line distinction between formal and informal language. Some words are more formal, and some are less, but there is not a hard choice about what

to do. It is different in Spanish. Spanish speakers must choose between the formal and the informal for verbs.

In English, we could say, “You walked,” if we were talking to a friend or a parent. In Spanish, you would say, “Tú caminaste”, if you were talking to a friend and “Usted camine”, if you were talking to a parent. The word “you” is different, and the verb has a different ending.

However, the way these terms are used varies depending on culture, country and social norms. In some places, people switch to “tú” more easily, and using “usted” can feel overly formal or distant. In other countries, “usted” is the default, even between friends, although its use can also depend on factors such as class, age and region.

Indigenous Languages from Latin America

It's important to remember that not all people from Latin America speak Spanish. Tens of thousands of Bay Area residents speak one of a dozen Latin American Indigenous languages as their first—or only—language. There are over 20,000 speakers of the Mayan language Mam alone. Recognizing Indigenous languages helps ensure communication is respectful, inclusive, and effective.

The languages with the highest number of speakers are:

- **Maya Languages (K'iche' and Mam)** from Guatemala and Southern Mexico, concentrated in East Oakland and San Francisco.
- **Zapoteco (Zapotec)** from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, concentrated on the San Mateo County Coast and other areas along the Central Coast.
- **Mixteco (Mixtec)** from the Mexican states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla, concentrated on the San Mateo County Coast, other areas along the Central Coast, and surrounding areas.
- **Triqui** from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, concentrated in San Jose and Southern Santa Clara County.

A large proportion of speakers of these languages work in the service industry and the agricultural sector. Because of the language barrier, the lack of access to formal education in their countries of origin, and the type of work they do, Bay Area communities who speak indigenous languages from Latin America face additional challenges related to environmental issues (chemical exposure, flooding, unsafe drinking water), housing, public transportation, as well as wage theft and related labor violations, among others.

Many of these groups suffered from prejudice and persecution in their home countries. Because of this, they may mistrust outside groups. Both because of the complexities of the languages as well as cultural nuances, it's important to collaborate with community organizations and other groups who have forged a relationship with these communities, understand them, and are trusted by them.

Sometimes it will not be possible to find a translator from English to the target language. In this case, it may be necessary to do relay interpreting (having one interpreter translate from English to Spanish and a second from Spanish to the indigenous language).

Chinese Languages

There are two major Chinese languages: Cantonese and Mandarin. It is very important to know that a speaker of one Chinese language cannot inherently understand the other language. It is the equivalent of French and Spanish or English and Icelandic. While they share a common history, some grammar, and a few words, just like you cannot understand this sentence *Mér líkar að vinna að húsnæðisstefnumótun*, a Mandarin speaker cannot inherently understand spoken Cantonese and vice versa. Jurisdictions will need to decide which Chinese language they want to use for interpretation or if they want to use both.

Mandarin is spoken across mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore. It is the official language of China and the most widely spoken Chinese variety in the world. Cantonese is spoken mainly in Hong Kong, Macau, and certain provinces. Even though there are ten times more Mandarin speakers than Cantonese speakers throughout the world, because of historical immigration patterns, many Chinese communities in the U.S. speak Cantonese.

In the Bay Area, Cantonese and Mandarin are spoken by different segments of the Chinese community. In many long-established Chinese neighborhoods, especially those with more seniors, and long-time immigrants, Cantonese is more common. Mandarin is more widely spoken among newer immigrants, students, and professionals, many of whom may also have some English proficiency.

In the region, approximately 124,000 people speak Mandarin at home, while 150,000 speak Cantonese. But the number varies dramatically by city. For example, in Berkeley there are three times more Mandarin speakers than Cantonese speakers, 3,700 compared to 900. Nearby, in North Oakland, the numbers are almost reversed, 900 compared to 3,100. The only way to know where is the greater demand is local knowledge (e.g. your experience, talking with social service organizations, etc.) See the table at the end of this section for regional numbers.

Choosing one Chinese language over the other can affect who is able to participate. When planning meetings or outreach, staff should consult

community-based organizations, tenant groups, housing providers, or other local partners to understand which Chinese language is most commonly used by the people who are most affected by the issue being discussed. In some neighborhoods, it may be appropriate to provide both Cantonese and Mandarin.

Written Chinese is very different. Historically, both Cantonese and Mandarin used the same written system. Even today the grammar and meaning are the same. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, mainland China switched to a simplified system with fewer keystrokes that can be written more quickly. In some cases, the characters remain the same - 人 means person in both systems. In other cases, it is different. This is the symbol for car in 車 traditional Chinese, while 车 is the symbol in simplified. Generally, readers of one can understand the other, perhaps with a little bit of guesswork.

Most industry translations are done in simplified characters. However, because Taiwan uses traditional Chinese and the mainland uses simplified, the choice is not simple and may be perceived as political. For some residents, the choice between simplified and traditional Chinese is tied to identity and lived experience, not just readability. In communities with many Hong Kong-,

Taiwan-, or long-established Chinese American residents, traditional Chinese may feel more familiar and respectful, while in other communities simplified Chinese may be more widely used.

As with Mandarin versus Cantonese, when possible, ask community-based organizations or local partners which written form people are most comfortable with before finalizing translations. Most jurisdictions in the Bay Area use simplified Chinese as a standard format, while recognizing that some neighborhoods may be better served by traditional Chinese.

A final note: in many Chinese-speaking communities, especially among older residents, people may be cautious about speaking directly or disagreeing in public. Concerns are often expressed indirectly or through stories rather than blunt statements. Interpreters who are familiar with local Chinese communities can help convey not just the words, but the intent and tone behind what people are saying. This can make a big difference in whether staff accurately understand residents' concerns.

Mandarin and Cantonese Speakers in the Bay Area

County	Mandarin	Cantonese
Alameda	30,385	36,686
Contra Costa	9,600	8,898
Marin	625	620
Napa	174	166
San Francisco	13,699	62,381
San Mateo	11,998	18,903
Santa Clara	55,331	20,868
Solano	1,152	898
Sonoma	537	575
Bay Area Total	123,501	149,995



Use of Traditional Versus Simplified Chinese

Simplified Chinese:

- Mainland China and Singapore
- Many publications and platforms, especially for government and commercial transactions

Traditional Chinese:

- Taiwan and Hong Kong
- Long-established Chinese communities in the U.S., especially Chinatowns

Vietnamese

Vietnamese is the national language of Vietnam and spoken by virtually all of the residents. However, it may be the second language for people from minority groups, particularly those from mountainous regions. There are moderate regional differences. North, South, and Central Vietnamese accents differ in pronunciation, tone, and specific vocabulary, with the North using more formal, traditional terms and the South preferring more concise, colloquial language. Although it is the same language and speakers can understand one another regardless of accent.

More important than regional differences is the use of terminology from the pre-1975 era (before the Vietnam War) and post-1975 era (after the Vietnam war). After the Vietnam War in 1975, many Vietnamese who immigrated to the U.S. kept the Vietnamese terminology they had learned before the end of the war, pre-1975, while the language in their former country evolved and changed in different ways, particularly pronunciation and word choice.

Additionally, many people who fled to the U.S. were ex-soldiers and families of the old Vietnamese regime (pre-1975

era) and may harbor animosity toward the new post-1975 Vietnamese regime. Therefore, new post-1975 terminology is sometimes viewed as being politically and emotionally charged. It is less an issue as generations shift, but remains a sensitive point for Vietnamese elders. As an interpreter or a translator, one should be aware of this issue and use terms appropriately, and can flag potential issues.

Additional points to consider include:

- **Trust is shaped by history.** Many Vietnamese Americans—especially refugees—carry lived experience including government persecution, war and displacement. They may have a distrust of official processes. This can show up as hesitation to speak publicly or reluctance to engage with government at all. If possible, partner with local organizations and ask for permission to attend existing events where Vietnamese are already gathering.
- **Respect for authority can limit open disagreement.** In many Vietnamese cultural contexts openly challenging officials can feel disrespectful. Elders may defer to perceived authority and people may say “yes” to be polite even if

they disagree. Consider small-group conversations, one-on-one listening sessions and asking open-ended questions. A question like, “Do you have concerns?” may be met with silence.

- **Spoken word is preferred.** Many elders are more comfortable with spoken explanation than written surveys, even in Vietnamese.
- **Elders play a central role.** Elders are generally respected and their opinions matter. Engage with them if possible.

Tagalog/Filipino

Choosing the right language

The Philippines has over 7000 islands and over 100 languages. The primary national language is called Filipino and it is widely spoken throughout the archipelago. It was created in the 20th century by combining Tagalog with words from many other languages. It is very similar to Tagalog and a speaker of one language can understand the other easily. However, there are differences. Tagalog, which is spoken in and around the capital, has fewer letters and fewer words borrowed from other languages. Filipino, the national language and used in television and other media, may be a little more accessible to people whose first language is one of the 100+ other languages in the country. Although they are different, colloquially, many people use the words Tagalog and Filipino interchangeably.

It is important to choose the right language when interpreting for non-English speakers. Many languages from the Philippines are not mutually intelligible so selecting the right one is important. Because Filipino is the national language, most residents of the Philippines speak it, albeit as their second language in many cases. It is therefore a safe choice. Tagalog, because it is so similar to Filipino, is also acceptable.

What makes hiring an interpreter this tricky is the word Filipino has two meanings: 1) the national language and 2) relating to the Philippines. So, hiring a Filipino (language) translator is good. Hiring a Filipino (person from the Philippines) may or may not be ok. The simple solution is to ask what language they plan on using.

Words Needed to Express a Concept

When translating from English to Tagalog, many more words are needed. For every syllable spoken in English, it often takes between 1.5 and 2 syllables in Tagalog to convey the same meaning accurately. This is called the expansion rate or the increase in the number of words or syllables to go from one language to another.

For example:

- English: The ma-na-ger is spea-king. (7 syllables)
- Tagalog: Ang ta-ga-pa-ma-ha-la ay nag-sa-sa-li-ta. (13 syllables)

When this difference is sustained over a presentation lasting an hour or more, the cumulative effect is substantial. Speakers and facilitators should be coached to remain mindful of this expansion rate in order to support effective interpretation and promote meaningful language access.

The two primary strategies for addressing this issue, speaking at a slower pace and pausing periodically, are discussed throughout this publication.

Translation vs. Description

The Philippines has a long history of colonization, first under Spain and later under the United States. As a result, modern Tagalog incorporates vocabulary from English, Spanish, and Indigenous Philippine languages, as well as influences from Arabic, Chinese, and Malay. In the 1940s, the United States established an education system in the Philippines modeled after the U.S. public school system. Consequently, many Filipinos are functionally fluent in English.

Because of this linguistic history, numerous English technical, legal, and scientific terms do not have direct Tagalog equivalents. In such cases,

English terms are often retained, particularly in formal or technical contexts. When a direct translation is unavailable or would be unclear, translators may provide descriptive explanations rather than literal translations.

For example, the term “greenhouse gas” is sometimes rendered descriptively as “gas na nakakulong ng init sa atmospera” (“gas that traps heat in the atmosphere”). In many Philippine government and scientific texts, however, “greenhouse gas” is left in English and then explained in Tagalog, reflecting the absence of a fully nativized technical term.

Familiar, Semi-Formal, and Formal Tone

Tagalog may be delivered—both orally and in writing—using three distinct tonal registers: familiar, semi-formal, and formal. It is important to discuss with your translator what degree of formality to use.

Familiar tone is used in everyday communication in relaxed, personal settings where there is no hierarchy. It is appropriate when addressing close friends, family members, peers of the same age or status, and people on a first-name basis. This tone relies on the second-person singular and is common in text messages, social media, and informal conversations. Using the familiar tone with superiors or strangers is generally considered disrespectful.

Semi-formal tone is used in polite but approachable contexts where respect is required, but warmth is still appropriate. This includes interactions with colleagues, clients, community

members, service providers, strangers, and older individuals. In this register, speakers use the second-person plural as an honorific form. Semi-formal tone is the most common register in public-facing and professional communication, including workplaces, community meetings, customer service interactions, and public announcements.

Formal tone is reserved for official, institutional, or legal communication, particularly in contexts involving clear authority or hierarchy. It is commonly used when addressing government officials, judges, clergy, senior executives, or elders in highly respectful situations. Typical contexts include government notices, legal documents, and official correspondence. The formal tone emphasizes neutrality, authority, and respect, and often minimizes direct personal address through impersonal or passive constructions.

Gender Neutrality

Tagalog is largely gender neutral in its pronouns and many kinship terms. There are no direct equivalents for “he/him” or “she/her.” As a result, gender distinctions must often be conveyed descriptively when relevant.

For example, “wife” may need to be translated as “asawang babae” (“spouse who is female”), and “brother” as “kapatid na lalaki” (“sibling who is male”). This structural feature of Tagalog can be advantageous in contexts where gender neutrality is preferred or required.

Word Substitutions

Tagalog is a highly adaptive language, incorporating vocabulary from many linguistic traditions. In practice, some translators or speakers “Tagalize” English words by altering their spelling or pronunciation to fit Tagalog phonology—for example, “driver” becoming “drayber” or “item” becoming “aytem.”

This practice is not considered best practice in professional translation or interpretation. The recommended approach is to retain the original English term rather than introducing phonetic distortions, which can reduce clarity and consistency, especially in technical or institutional contexts.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

This handbook builds off of the experiences of the authors as both professional interpreters, translators, and stakeholders in bilingual planning spaces. It also gathers the experiences of other professional translators and interpreters, as well as professionals who have worked to further language access in their planning practice. We

conducted one focus group with these professionals and complemented the findings from that group with semi-structured interviews. We sought to gather as many voices, experiences and lessons as we could to build a handbook that would enrich and strengthen language access in the Bay Area and beyond.

Credits and Acknowledgements

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ENDNOTES

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