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Plain English and Multilingual Government Communication

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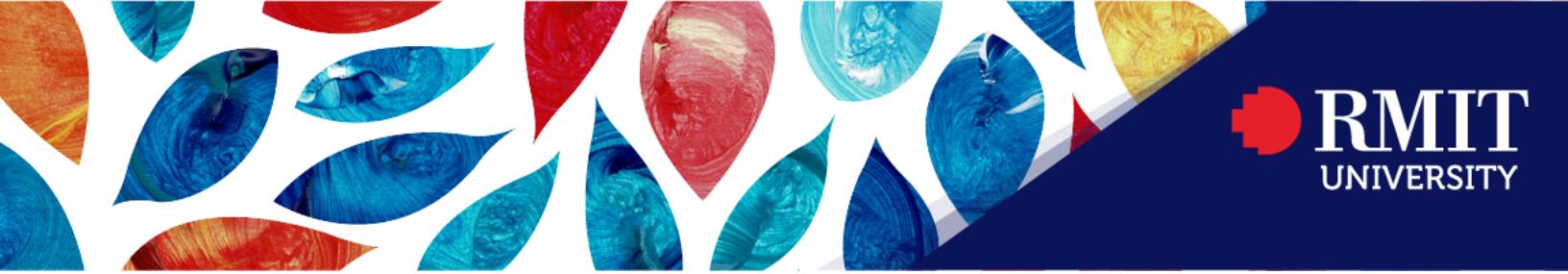
This report explains why translating and interpreting have been included as core considerations in the *Plain English Policy* of the Australian Department of Health and Aged Care (Health). Typically, translating and interpreting do not appear in such policies, and the idea that plain English supports goals of multilingualism and multiculturalism is a relatively new justification for its advocacy. Therefore, this report first summarises existing scholarship, which provides a theoretical basis for connecting plain English with translation and interpreting. Second, it presents firsthand data collected on this link in Australia in 2023. Researchers surveyed non-English speakers to evaluate their views of documents translated from plain English government communications into various languages, compared to documents not drafted according to these principles. Overall, the report suggests that strong empirical and theoretical foundations support the idea that translating and interpreting are fundamentally enhanced by plain English principles. Health's policy, which incorporates these principles, therefore advances the communication aims of the government, meets the information needs of non-English-speaking Australians, and supports the professionalism of interpreting and translation professions. This report addresses each of these benefits in turn.

Promoting public service interpreting and translation through plain English communication

In 2022, researcher Raquel Lázaro Gutiérrez discussed how public institutions and other commissioners of translation and interpreting (T&I) assignments contribute to the development of the T&I sector. Focusing on interpreting, she theorised that "not only interpreters (providers) but also the grantors and the receivers, amongst others, play a part in the professionalization process of the interpreting profession."[1] Gutiérrez suggested that commissioners shape how translators and interpreters perform their work and influence the overall development of the T&I sector through their engagement with T&I professionals and the roles in which they employ them. In other words, the T&I sector possesses a broad range of skills that can be flexibly applied to various communication functions, including drafting, editing, transcreation and multimodal creation, and government's engagement with these skills both shapes its multilingual communications as well as the overall response of the T&I sector to the need of non-English-speaking Australians.

Gutiérrez emphasises that the interaction between commissioners and T&I professionals is crucial for setting industry standards and best practices. Commissioners who prioritise high-quality translations encourage a culture of excellence and continuous improvement within the sector. By providing clear guidelines, feedback, and opportunities for professional development, commissioners can foster a more robust and adaptable T&I workforce. Additionally, recognising the diverse skill set of T&I professionals, mentioned above, allows for more innovative and effective communication strategies, ultimately enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of English communications as well. This collaborative approach not only benefits T&I professionals but also ensures end users receive accurate and culturally sensitive information, thereby improving overall public trust and engagement.

Health's approach to T&I does not have to be a passive one. Collaboration with T&I professionals from the early planning stages can lead to multilingual communications that are

attuned to the needs of different language communities, and which draw innovatively on the latest multimodal approaches and technologies. These innovations can then reciprocally contribute to new approaches in the planning of English-language communications. Employing in-house translators and interpreters can provide Health with health-related linguistic expertise that is able to be deployed in multilingual communications, liaison with non-English-speaking local communities, reading of non-English research and government materials to gain information from abroad, and in Health engagement with a wider range of Australian residents. Such steps to embed linguistic expertise within Health would also advance the multilingual planning process and the communications of the Department overall. Existing research suggests this kind of embedded collaboration would advance the work of the Australian Government.

Meeting the communication aims of government through plain English

Research on the benefits of good drafting of health communications for multilingual translation has circulated in Australia for more than ten years.[2] Early research, published in 2011, examines the accessibility of health information for migrant populations in Australia and the impact of translating this information into community languages. Burns and Kim highlight the critical role that effective translation and interpreting play in bridging language barriers, ensuring that health information is accessible to non-English-speaking communities. They underscore the importance of cultural and linguistic accuracy in translations to enhance understanding and engagement with health services. While the authors do not address plain English as a strategy of good drafting specifically, their conclusions support this understanding. Subsequent research which does address the link between plain English and translation directly, observes significant benefits for multilingual communications.[3] Jingwei Li, for example, explores plain English principles in non-literary translation. Li argues that using plain English can significantly enhance the clarity and accessibility of translated texts across various fields such as politics, law, economics and technology. Li's research demonstrates how plain English can reduce complexity and ambiguity, therefore making translated materials more understandable for a broader audience. The author also highlights the importance of adapting these principles to different cultural contexts to ensure that translations remain relevant and effective.

These insights have already been institutionally acted upon, and the 2016 European Commission publication *How to write clearly*, which is available in all EU languages, has the aim of "helping to write clear and more effective documents (including legislation, a technical report, minutes, a press release or a speech) in the official and working languages of the Commission…[through offering] 'hints, not rules' to implement after taking into account the 'target readers and the purpose of your document'".[4] The implementation of such guidelines underscores growing recognition of plain English principles as linked to multilingual and multicultural communication undertaken by government. Not just for local migrant and indigenous communications, but, as global interactions increase, the need for universally understandable and culturally sensitive communication becomes even more critical, and plain English strategies can assist in international knowledge transfer and the sharing of health-related expertise globally.

In relation to health communications specifically, Barbara Cappuzzo discusses the role of both multilingual and plain English government communications in ensuring all demographic groups have access to COVID-19-related information. She makes the point that translation is essential for health communication, in enabling non-English speakers to understand and follow health guidelines, and ideally exists alongside plain English information that can be used to supplement multilingual texts as well as provide source texts for translation. Cappuzzo analysed the availability and clarity of multilingual COVID-19 information on Italian governmental and nongovernmental websites, highlighting significant disparities in information accessibility according to language. Overall, the research advocates for the use of plain English to improve the intelligibility of health communications for diverse populations.[5]
 The research establishes a descriptive-qualitative basis for the usefulness of plain English in multilingual communications, which has not yet been fully established in empirical research. Testing the useability and 'read-response' of translations composed on the basis of plain English source documents allows for an assessment of the link between plain English and multilingual translation that is contextualised in the real world, based on the genuine reactions of people in relevant communities. Moreover, such research draws on the expertise of multilingual Australians who have ground-level knowledge of their local communities and their needs.

Meeting the information needs of non-English speaking Australians through plain English communication

This section describes feedback received from respondents across 7 languages who read four health-related documents that were translated using the following four different methods:

> Version 1: Human translation as normal
> Version 2: Machine translation with human post editing
> Version 3: Plain English re-writing and then human translation
> Version 4: Transcreation (the translator wrote the health communication in the non-English language on the basis of drafting instructions).

For each document, respondents were asked which document they found most confusing, which one they found easiest to read and which document they believed would be preferred by their families and friends. The responses to these questions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1.

Community respondent preferences
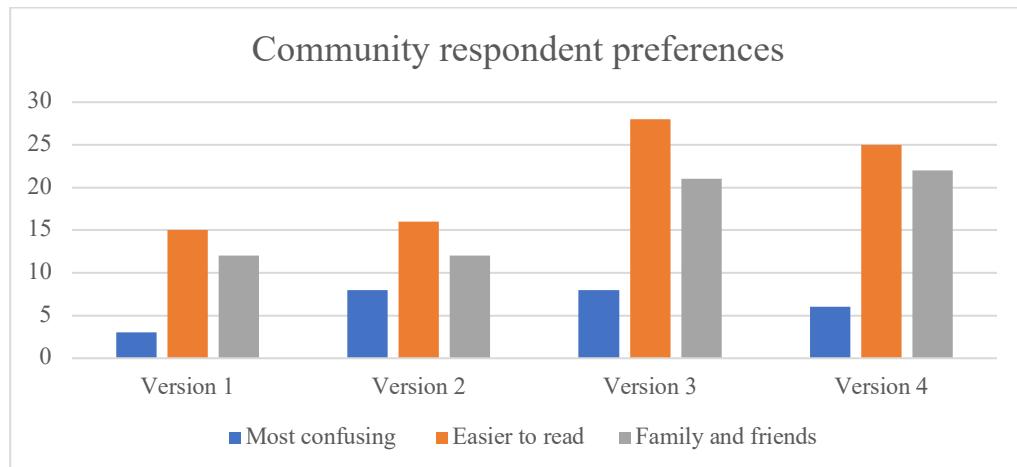
Paradoxically, Version 3, the document translated from a plain English re-writing, was both the easiest to read and, on par with Version 2, the most confusing. Version 4 (transcreation) was second in terms of ease of reading, was slightly less confusing, and was most respondents' choice for family and friends. Version 2 showed a much lower level of preference and seemed to create just as much confusion as Version 3. Version 1, on the other hand, created the least amount of confusion, but it was also the least favoured both by respondents, and as a choice for respondents' communities. It is therefore arguable that Version 3 and Version 4 seem to be the preferred methods. This gives empirical substance, even if partial, to our understanding of plain English as promoting effective and accessible translations, and so meeting the multilingual communication goals of Health.

Preferences

A closer comparison of the methods can be obtained through a thematic analysis of open-ended responses from participants on their preferences. The thematic analysis of responses in relation to which of the four options was easiest to read revealed eight key themes. These 'positive' themes are listed below in order of the total number of mentions, reflecting their importance from respondents' perspectives.

1. Ease of reading and comprehension
   Many responses stated that the text was 'clear', 'easy to read', 'easy to understand', 'simple', that it 'makes sense' or it 'flows well'. These responses were often generic and did not specify what made the text easy to understand, or what made it flow well.

2. Layout and text organisation
   Many respondents focused on the layout and the text organisation of the documents. They found for example that the use of diagrams and charts simplified reading, that a better font made a difference and that a clear structure, with subheadings, helped them unravel information.

3. Use of language
   Respondents appreciated documents with clear and simple wording, especially if the language used was also idiomatic. Furthermore, correct grammar and use of appropriate language were also positively appraised.

4. Quality of information
   This theme covers responses related mainly to content rather than form. Particularly appreciated was information that was clear, detailed and complete. The perceived accuracy of the information also played a role in respondents' preferences for texts, as well as the inclusion of evidence or links for fact checking.

5. Conciseness
   Short and straight to the point was the clear preference for respondents.

6. Register
   In order for a text to be preferred by respondents it had to be both 'not too casual' and 'not too formal'.

7. Appropriateness for target community
   When deciding which text they preferred, respondents also kept in mind that the texts may often be directed at the elderly, or at their specific community. Characteristics that made a text appropriate for the target community included fewer clickable links, conciseness as well as simple and idiomatic language.

8. Professional appearance
   Some respondents commented on a text's professional appearance, describing them as seemingly 'more official' and thus 'more trustworthy'.

Chart 1 illustrates the occurrence of positive themes for each translation method.

Chart 1.
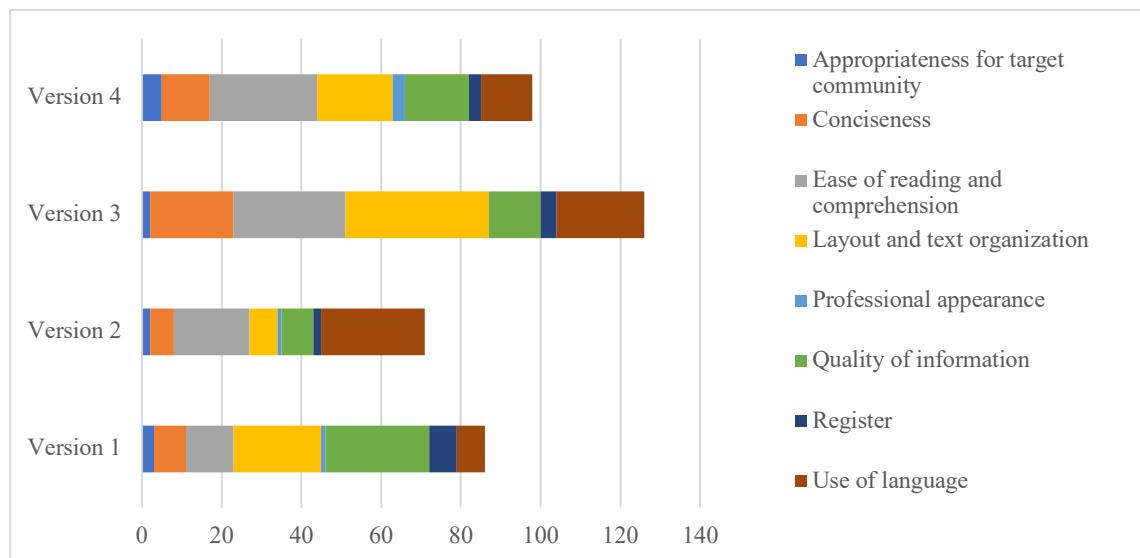
Chart 1 helps to explain reasons for the preference of Version 3 over other versions. Namely layout and text organisation, use of language, and conciseness.

Version 3 was often described as using 'easy language', being easy to navigate and to understand due to its format (charts, bullet points, subheadings and the Q&A format) and finally as being short and straight to the point. These three themes are where Version 3 is preferred over Version 4 as well. In general, Versions 3 and 4 are more often described as 'easy to read and understand' compared to Versions 1 and 2.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, Version 2 had the largest number of reactions for the 'use of language' theme. Respondents regarded Version 2 as using the most common or idiomatic language.

While many respondents appreciated the conciseness of Version 3, Versions 1 and 4 were differently preferred for their quality of content, with Version 1 regarded as having the most 'clear information' and Version 4 regarded as 'rich in detail'.

Causes for dislike

Having identified a version they found most confusing, respondents were further asked about the reasons for confusion. Eight themes emerged in participants' responses to the question. These 'negative' themes are listed below in order of the total number of mentions, reflecting their importance from respondents' perspectives.

1. Language use
   Participants disliked texts with poor wording, this included unidiomatic, inappropriate, confusing and complex language. Furthermore, participants noticed untranslated text, mistranslations and incorrect grammar.

2. Layout issues
    Layout issues included bad font and poor text organisation, with texts being written 'like an essay' rather than being organised in short paragraphs and using subheadings.

3. Reading or comprehension difficulties
    Many respondents labeled a text 'difficult to read', 'unclear' or 'confusing', without specifying what caused these difficulties.

4. Quality of information
    Confusing, contradictory or incorrect information were a main reason for participants to dislike a text, in some cases participants reported missing or broken links, and reference to elements missing in the text.

5. Inappropriateness for the target community
    With the target community in mind once more, participants wondered whether the use of many clickable features may be an issue. Furthermore, some participants highlighted low levels of literacy and schooling in their communities, which could mean readers would be unable to understand the diagrams included.

6. Unprofessional appearance
    The responses under this theme believed that a text lost reliability when it appeared unprofessional or unofficial. Unusual formatting may have inadvertently produced this effect.

7. Length
    Repetitive and long texts were not appreciated by respondents.

8. Register
    Some participants showed concern around the effectiveness of a text with wording that seemed too casual, or too forcefully instructive.

Chart 2 illustrates the occurrence of negative themes for each translation method.

Chart 2.
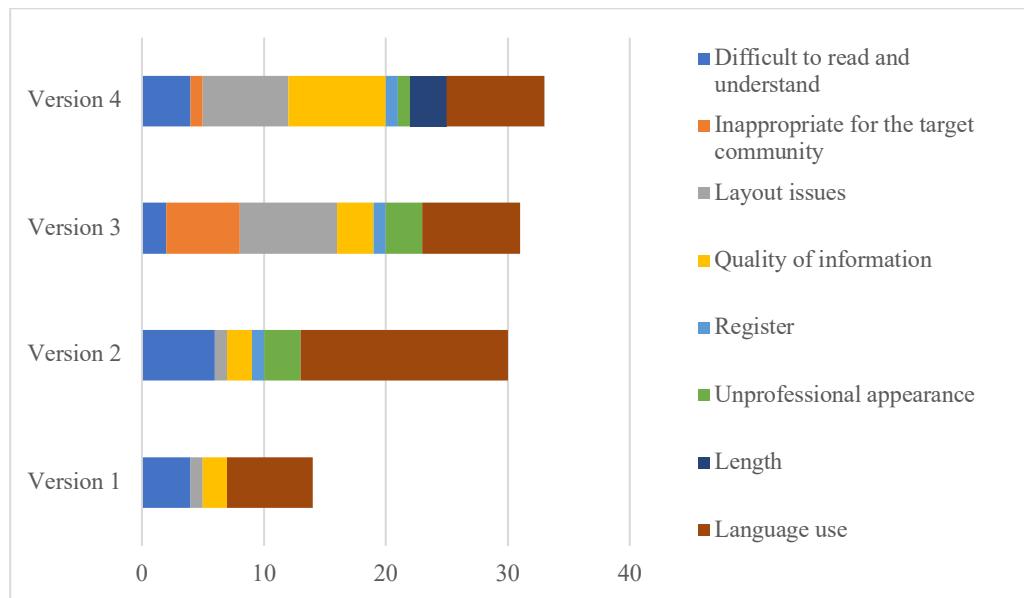
The main issue that respondents identified with Version 3 compared to other versions was its 'inappropriateness' for target language communities. Specifically, elderly who may struggle with its many clickable links. Further, in line with what can also be seen in the positive themes chart, Version 3 appeared unprofessional (indeed, no positive responses labelling Version 3 as 'official looking' or 'professional' were found), because, respondents said, the format was unusual for official communication.

This analysis of negative themes confirms that Version 3 provoked least reading difficulty but significant layout issues, with the biggest being poor font. Some respondents also doubted whether their communities would be able to read the included diagrams, due to low levels of schooling and literacy.

Version 4 had issues with quality of content, with some contradictory or incomplete information. The text also seemed lengthy to some respondents who did not deem this version suitable for their communities.

In contrast to the positives, readers of Version 2 noticed a large number of 'language use' issues, from untranslated sentences to grammatical mistakes, and nonsensical sentences to unidiomatic wording. Such language use issues, respondents said, can cause confusion in

readers or lead to mistrust in the information.

It was interesting to see that even though 'quality of information' was not a particularly strong attribute of Version 3, it was also not a concerning issue, meaning that Version 3 did not prioritise conciseness and ease of understanding to the detriment of content quality.

Conclusion

This qualitative-descriptive analysis of translation produced on the basis of English source texts that were drafted according to plain English principles shows the benefits of simple language, conciseness, and user-friendly layout. It demonstrates how readability and understanding can be significantly enhanced when plain English is incorporated as a step in between the drafting of government communications and their translation. This approach to the drafting of multilingual communications did, however, also face criticism for its perceived unprofessional appearance and potential unsuitability for communities with lower literacy levels, due to its reliance on diagrams and clickable links.

Version 4, the transcreation approach in which drafters compose communications into other languages on the basis of drafting instructions, was also well-received, particularly in terms of clarity, professional presentation and detailed content. Nonetheless, it is notable that Version 4 was sometimes seen as too lengthy and complex, which hindered its accessibility for certain readers.

The other two methods, human translation (Version 1) and machine translation with human post-editing (Version 2), while demonstrating strengths in specific areas, such as information quality in Version 1, also showed significant drawbacks, with more comprehension and reading difficulties compared to the other described methods.

Overall, this analysis underscores the importance of considering both the target audience's characteristics and the desired communication goals when incorporating plain English in the drafting of multilingual Health communications. Effective translation is not just about linguistic accuracy but also about ensuring that the message is accessible, comprehensible, and engaging for the intended audience. While strategies may be needed to ensure engagement for audiences lacking computer literacy skills, translating from plain English source texts remains a promising approach to creating multilingual communications that combine clarity and readability without compromising the quality of their contents.

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