

Creating Bilingual Glossaries – A Tool for Researchers, Clinicians, and Public Health Professionals Working with Communities Who Speak Languages Other Than English

In the United States, equitable research and health communication requires translation of words and concepts into languages other than English. This process often goes beyond using a translation dictionary. In some languages, words that are commonplace in English do not have a “word-for-word” equivalent. Instead, they must be explained using a phrase that captures an equivalent idea. Teams should also use non-technical, less formal words that are understood and used by laypeople in their daily lives. In some languages, the “right word” depends upon the countries in which someone has lived, which other languages they speak, how long they have lived in the U.S., the extent of their exposure to the complex health care system in the U.S., and their educational background.

We suggest that research and health communication teams create bilingual glossaries of key words and concepts before embarking on document translation or other activities that require communication in the desired language. Bilingual glossaries ensure all parties—those who speak only English and those who speak the desired language—have a shared understanding of the message they hope to convey.

In this document, we share one approach for creating bilingual glossaries.¹ Our goal is to provide a step-by-step guide to help other research, health and public health teams implement this method in practice. We did not create this method, and it is closely related to other consensus-based translation protocols.^{2,3} Bilingual glossaries are widely used by research and health communication teams in the U.S. and internationally.^{4,5,6}

STEP ONE: Decide whether you need a bilingual glossary and who this glossary is for.

Glossaries are most helpful for words that must be used frequently for a project and that also:

- Describe concepts that may not have exact equivalents in other cultural contexts, e.g., “depression” or “trauma”;
- Describe complex or technical concepts, e.g., “psychological therapy” or “herd immunity”; or
- Need to be understood by speakers of a language with significant geographic or social variation in daily usage, e.g., Swahili/Kiswahili as spoken in Tanzania, Kenya and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

In our experience, bilingual glossaries are most helpful for languages with less standardization. For example, bilingual glossaries can be helpful for Kiswahili (Swahili), which is spoken by richly polyglot communities who originate from across East and Central Africa. In contrast, a bilingual glossary may be less useful for Ukrainian, which is less likely to be interwoven with terms from other local languages.

As part of Step 1, articulate the audience whom you hope to reach. If you will be communicating with a community that speaks a standardized form of the desired language, a bilingual glossary is unlikely to improve your final translation. Knowing the audience for the glossary will also help you recruit the most appropriate people for the language team.

STEP TWO: Select key words and phrases in English.

To keep the project manageable, select a subset of key terms that you expect to use often, that are critical to the project, and that you anticipate will be more challenging to translate. In prior projects, these words included “trauma,” “psychological therapy” and (to our surprise) “allergy.” You should recruit a language team leader (see Step 4) to help if your team does not include someone who is an expert in the language.

STEP THREE: Define each word using everyday English language.

Write a clear definition of each word in everyday English language (often called “plain language”)⁷. Work with a content expert, if needed. Good translation starts with unambiguous and clear English. It may be helpful to write example sentences demonstrating the typical usage of each term. Remember, bilingual glossaries focus on meaning-for-meaning equivalence for laypeople.

STEP FOUR: Recruit and budget for a language team.

If you do not already work with people who are bilingual and bicultural for the desired language and community, recruiting the right language team is often the most difficult step. We recommend that you start recruitment as soon as you have identified the key terms in English (Step 2), if not sooner.

The language team must include bilingual individuals who reflect the diversity of the audience and have experience communicating with a wide range of people who use the language in question (e.g., from different age groups, genders, and educational backgrounds). For example, a bilingual Kiswahili (Swahili) glossary may require language team members from different countries. A bilingual Burmese glossary may require team members who speak Burmese at home, as well as those who only speak Burmese outside the home. For these reasons, language teams typically need 2-3 members.

It is helpful if language team members have prior professional experience with translation. But given the goals of a bilingual glossary (communication in everyday language with communities with high internal diversity), community and “everyday language” expertise are often more important than translation expertise. This is why glossary work is often done by community-based experts rather than simply outsourcing to language services vendors without community expertise. Ensure at least one person on the team (the leader) can type in the desired language; word processing is more challenging for languages without widely available standard fonts.

Most language teams work on an hourly basis. We recommend offering an hourly rate comparable to local interpreting/translation vendors. In addition to the time required to make translation recommendations (about 1 to 2 hours per set of 10 words), you will need to factor in the time required to orient the language team to the workflow and documentation template (1-2 hours) and time needed to review the English language terms (about 1 to 4 hours per set of 10 words/phrases depending on complexity and degree of cultural distance between English and the desired language). You need to designate a language team leader. This person will ensure the team uses a standardized documentation template. They will also submit the final recommendations, answer questions and review the final version of the glossary prior to publication.

Most bilingual glossary projects take a few weeks once you have identified the language team members. However, if few words/concepts have clear equivalents in the target language—exactly when a bilingual glossary is most helpful—you will need more time. In this case, arriving at shared understanding of each term may need more time for discussion, and language teams may want to spend time speaking with other community members before agreeing on a recommended translation.

STEP FIVE: Prepare your language team.

Community members are often surprised that you are investing time and effort on accurate and inclusive communication that considers the diversity of language use within their community. Affirming your goal and explaining the process will ensure subsequent steps work as intended. Ensure your audience, timeline, translation requirements, documentation requirements and reimbursement plan are clear to everyone from the beginning. As an example, it may be helpful to talk through times when language team members have experienced translation of important materials that has not been “quite right” and that has led to confusion to demonstrate the importance of this type of project.

STEP SIX: Use a template for the language team to document their work.

Prepare a documentation template and review it in detail with the language team leader. They will in turn review the template with the language team. Our documentation template and process are shown below:

Documentation Template:

| Word & Definition | Example | Translation | Translation Notes |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Psychiatrist</p> <p>A physician who specializes in problems with stress, emotions, behavior, and thoughts. They can diagnose these problems and, when appropriate, prescribe medication or recommend psychological therapy to treat these problems.</p> | <p>“Dr. Morales is a psychiatrist. She will provide guidance on which medication might help reduce your feelings of panic and anxiety.”</p> | <p>Doktari wa afya ya akili</p> <p>(mental health [brain/thinking] doctor)</p> | <p>There is no equivalent word used commonly by all members of the Congolese (DRC) refugee community. People may also be unfamiliar with this professional role, so additional explanation is likely to be helpful. We recommend a short, neutral phrase that avoids using stigmatizing terms for mental health.</p> <p>Not Recommended: Avoid stigmatizing terms for mental health such as “doktari wenye anafatiliya benye beko na ugojwa mu kicwa”</p> |

Glossary Process:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The project team drafts the “Word & Definition” (Column 1) and an “Example” sentence (Column 2). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The project team and language team review each word and definition together to confirm shared understanding of each term. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each language team member works independently on their plain language “Translation” (Column 3) and drafts “Translation Notes” (Column 4).<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Translation Notes</i> should help monolingual English-speakers understand nuances of conveying the word or phrase in the desired language. These notes may also include information about geographic variation in preferred terminology.○ Terms that are <i>Not Recommended</i> should be flagged along with an explanation. Sometimes these terms are stigmatizing. Sometimes they are misleading, e.g., a word for “allergy” in Kinyarwanda that refers only to skin rashes. Sometimes these terms are technically correct but incomprehensible to laypeople. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The language team meets to share and reconcile their recommendations. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The language team leader drafts a final, bilingual document reflecting the language team’s consensus recommendations. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The project team reviews the document to ensure the explanations make sense to monolingual English-speakers. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The language team leader reviews and approves the final version prior to publication. |

STEP SEVEN: Share your work.

Bilingual glossaries can also be useful to other teams working with similar communities. We recommend publishing your bilingual glossary with a brief note describing the audience. Include a suggested citation with attribution to the project and language team members.

Prior examples include our bilingual glossaries on Effective Treatment of Refugee Adults with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the IRC/National Resource Center for Refugee, Immigrant and Migrants Sexual and Reproductive Health Glossary, and the Australian (New South Wales) Multicultural Health Communication Service’s Glossary of Medical Terminology for Immunisation and Vaccine Development.^{1,8,9} We also recommend that researchers review the open source publication, “Strengthening the informed consent process in international health research through community engagement” with attention to their workshop-based process for describing key concepts related to research.

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