Speaking a Common Language:
working with translators, international visitors,
and multicultural communities

*Companion document to NAI 2014 National Conference presentation*

General notes:

• One of the best investments you can make regarding your existing material resources (exhibits, interpretive carts, program materials, etc) is to invite local community members with connections to different countries to look them over with you. Ask them to describe how people from their country, region, or culture might perceive its various facets. What comes through clearly? What might need additional work or supporting materials to avoid confusion? If possible, get more than one participant to reduce the risk of regional or personal bias affecting the feedback.

Material Resources

• It doesn’t sound like much, but a simple and effective way to set a positive tone for people’s visits is to create a “Welcome!” collage in many different languages as a visual seen upon entrance to the site. Take it one step further by learning a basic greeting in commonly heard languages. Just that small effort can make a big impact.

• Translated Brochures, Signage, & Symbols (remember to add symbols to maps and site locations, instead of simply translating text. Stencil paths on the floor are inexpensive, intuitive, and very useful)

• Take-home materials (scavenger hunts with photos/pictures that can lead to representative exhibit pieces that may include translated information, cards with photos/pictures of representative animals, people, exhibits, etc. for keepsakes. Latin names are fairly universal, if including translated text to the cards isn't feasible)
• Multimedia / Sense-based exhibit additions
• Traditional, Immersive, & Interactive Exhibits

• Hands-on materials / Interpretation carts (check the country profiles regarding specific concerns about animal hides, touching, etc)

• Interpreters, Pantomimes, & Performers

Online & Computer Resources

**Special note:** Do not depend solely on translation software, apps, or online services. They are wonderful tools, but can be prone to glitches and mistranslations; they also may be using forms of the language that are inaccessible to your visitors (ex: specialized technical terms, antiquated terms, regionally unknown terms). It’s safest to verify the translations with someone who is familiar with the standard form of the language and – ideally – the regional vocabulary of most of your visitors. Some apps and services have real people assisting in the translation; those are also going to be safer bets than a fully automated one. Sites like wordreference.com also have forums where people from all over the world will respond to regional wording questions.

• Online Materials (QR Codes, translated website pages are easier to create and update than physical materials)

• Country and region profiles are excellent primers in learning how to more effectively and politely communicate with visitors from different countries, while avoiding offense and providing a welcoming ambiance to your site, but keep in mind that nobody is required to go by their cultural profiles! Read the profile for the US / your home country for a sense of how the accuracy can vary.

Country profile sites:
• http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/
• http://www.intercultures.ca/
• http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/cultural_etiquette.htm
• http://www.worldbusinessculture.com/
• http://www.countryreports.org/

• Translation dictionaries and forums:
• http://wordreference.com/
• http://www.freetranslation.com/
Social Resources

• Community Organizations / Immigrant Services
• Representatives from regional cultural groups
• Interpreter recruits from diverse communities
• Libraries, City Hall, Chamber of Commerce
• Schools, Board of Education (community service, class credit, after school programs/clubs)
• Universities (internships, community service, class credit, student cultural groups)
• Local communities - ethnic and otherwise - are very often rich, untapped sources of information, support, and connection for interpreters. Research your area, talk to community leaders, ask people for advice and help to reach out to their neighborhoods, and you may find your efforts much more effective and affordable.

Personal Resources

• Confidence, Humor, and Humility. Start dialogues! Ask questions!
• What are your fundamental themes and messages? What universal concepts are present? What do you want them to walk away with?
• Empathy and Perceptiveness are crucial skills to develop. Remember to be compassionate toward the visitors, the translator, and yourself.
• Take some time to mentally prepare; be aware of your limitations going in (ex. Not being able to make use of all your lovely piles of verbal information)
• Visitors tend to notice your posture, tone of voice, facial expressions, and other non-vocal forms of communication more than visitors who are fluent in the language. Many are also anxious about their lack of familiarity with the language and culture. Having a relaxed, polite, and welcoming
persona does wonders to break down barriers and make them feel like they belong at your site, instead of being sources of stress and inconvenience.

- Metaphors and humor in the form of jokes or culture-specific topics can be tricky, but the ability to laugh at yourself and deal with difficulties with patience and smiles is a great tool to have in your kit.

- Ask questions instead of assuming. If you’re reading the group’s body language and are unsure that things are getting across, check in.

- If there’s any question, ask people what they prefer to be called (ex. Latino/Hispanic/Mexican/Nahua)

- Know and learn the difference between cultural norms and damaging stereotypes.

Translators*: A Hybrid of Material, Social, and Personal Resources

- Your translator is your partner in interpretation. They work with you to create meaning and relationships between your site and the visitor, linguistically and culturally. In many ways they are your interpretive target, as they need to understand your message to relay it effectively.

- Technically, the term translator applies only to someone who works with text, and an interpreter is someone whose focus is the spoke word. However, translator is commonly used by the public to refer to anyone who bridges the gap between two languages, and will be used here to differentiate between language interpreters and heritage interpreters. Keep in mind that most people in this field, especially professionals, will expect to be called an interpreter.

- It’s especially helpful to give them the major theme and topic points you want the visitors to come away with by the end of the program, as it helps the translator know where to direct his or her focus.

- If possible, provide the translator advance information the planned program and activities so that they can familiarize themselves with the material and vocabulary expected.
• Unless you’re highly interactive and/or dressed in costume, your visitors are going to be focusing most of their attention on the translator. Most of what they ask and you present will pass through the filter of the translator. Be aware of that!

• Spend at least a few minutes getting to know the translator before beginning your program. Find out their interests, knowledge in the program’s topic, site familiarity, specialties, potential biases, concerns, etc. It’s worth the time!

• *Logistics translation* (customer service, technical instructions, emergency/safety information, etc) vs *interpretive translation* (programming, educational information): chances are you’ll need both

• Logistics translation can usually be done in advance in a concrete, unchanging format (possible strong exceptions: customer service and emergency communications)

• Interpretive translation can be done in advance, but is also more of an adaptive, “in the moment” format

• A crowd-friendly way to incorporate translation services into a presentation is to have the translator gather the non English-speaking visitors together and quietly interact with them within the larger group, both translating and communicating questions or comments they have to the presenter and the larger group. This prevents them from being separated or singled out, while allowing the presentation to progress in a timely manner without requiring the rest of the visitors to repeatedly wait while the same information is given in another language.

• Keep in mind that switching between languages requires the agility to interpret jokes, metaphors, figures of speech, euphemisms, cultural references, and even measurements. Some of these things will simply not translate either linguistically or culturally. Keep your words clear, straightforward, and specific. Try to avoid language or culture-specific jokes or references, though it’s inevitable that some will occur with your natural speech. An experienced translator may be able to find comparable terms or references to work with in the visitor’s language.

• Build in pauses! Make sure to give the translator time to process information and ask you questions/verify what it is you want to be said. Remember that a translator is switching between multiple languages and cultural norms in their head and in the moment.
• Avoid referring to a translator’s language as a dialect or “not real” (eg “He doesn’t speak real Spanish; he speaks Mexican”). This can be as offensive and inaccurate as telling someone from Boston that they don’t speak “real English” because of their use of local words and pronunciations.

• That said, it’s important to be aware of regional or generational colloquialisms that may or may not translate to everyone who speaks the language.

**Four Common Categories of Translators**

**Professional**

• Has been trained and certified to provide translation services
• You **should** be able to trust their translations, but don’t blindly turn over responsibility to the translator. Check in and have them verify what is being said.
• Tends to have greater confidence in presenting and may take most easily to the role of partner to the interpreter
• Could have own perceptions and biases about the site or the visiting group’s intentions/background/interests that color translations. If it looks like there are discrepancies between what is being expressed by the group or by you, check in and have the translator explain their actions
• Should have experience with a variety of visitors from different cultures or countries, and be able to answer your questions about specific points of etiquette and courtesy

**Student**

• Academically prepared, but skill level could vary widely. Check in first!
• May have excellent grammar but limited experience with casual conversation
• Could be a native speaker
• May not relate culturally, only linguistically
• Spend some time beforehand discussing how he/she learned the language, the primary focus of study, locations traveled, familiarity with your site and relevant vocabulary, familiarity with the group’s country of origin
• It would be recommended to approach your interactions with more of a professional tone, or at least a less casual one than with an amateur or accidental translator

**Amateur**
• Should have had some advance notice, with time to mentally prepare for the presentation
• Often volunteers from or involved in local immigrant communities. May have cultural insights. Could be a native speaker and/or child of immigrants.
• Possibly socially connected to, and relates to, the visitors
• May lack professional vocabulary
• May see themselves as a cross between an interpretive colleague and a guest to the site
• You may wish to take a balanced approach between casual and professional

“Accidental” / Spontaneous

• Usually part of the visiting group, representative of their interests and concerns, and likely prefer to treated like the guests of the site that they are.
• They may panic a little at suddenly being required to translate. It is very important to give them a simple rundown of what to expect and basic information about what they’ll be covering with you.
• Can be a “wild card”, as far as actions, perceptions, and word choices
• Possibly lacks any training, with limited relevant or appropriate vocabulary
• Potential for great insight to visitors and can help you cultivate a friendly relationship with the group
• Put extra effort into making sure he/she feels comfortable and appreciated, approach this in more of a casual way to reduce anxiety and make sure the translator is enjoying the experience
Further Info:

*includes contacts for translator/interpreter services*


**NAI books translated to Spanish:**
