

Innovations in Foreign Language Communication

A White Paper by Language Line Services



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Introduction

This is the first in a series of white papers on innovations and best practices in foreign language interpretation and translation. Language Line Services, the world's leading provider of language services to federal government agencies, is issuing these white papers as a service to senior government executives and managers who are tasked with addressing foreign language challenges. The goal is to expand knowledge and promote thought leadership relating to this increasingly important federal government function.

There has been a long-standing debate within the federal government regarding the need to speak to people, in English, or in the language of their national origin. The central question is this — should we require everyone to speak English, or should we assist those with limited English proficiency (LEP)?

Ten years ago, the federal government answered that question. By enacting Executive Order 13166, which directs federal agencies to acknowledge language barriers and provide LEP persons with meaningful access to agency services, the federal government made the decision to aid citizens and residents in need of language assistance. This executive order has been implemented to varying degrees, over time, but the urgency to fulfill the order is growing. One indication is the ten-fold increase in federal expenditures on language services over the past decade. More recently, in February of 2011, the Department of Justice stepped forward and reaffirmed the order's importance with new action items and a promise to audit implementation.

There is another, equally vital function regarding foreign language capabilities that is specific to the Department of Defense and the intelligence community. Department of Defense (DoD) Directive 5160.41E established a Defense Language Program that supports DoD missions worldwide and their associated foreign language requirements.

Nancy Weaver, the DoD's Senior Language Authority, recently described the emerging needs to the American Forces Press by saying, "Post 9/11 military operations reinforce the reality that the Department of Defense needs a significantly improved organic capability in emerging languages and dialects. The Department requires greater competence and regional area skills in those languages and dialects as well as a surge capability to rapidly expand its language capabilities on short notice." Similar global language requirements exist for the broader intelligence community as well.

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Our new series of Language Line Services' white papers is designed to inform civilian agency managers and senior intelligence officials about the latest foreign language service trends and practices. This initial white paper will provide a summary of best practices in foreign language in the following areas: Over-the-Phone Interpretation (OPI), Translation Management Systems, and Foreign Language Testing and Training. In the coming months, Language Line Services will release more detailed white papers on each of these foreign language capabilities.

Over-the-Phone Interpretation

When businesses, government agencies, and other organizations need immediate access to an interpreter, they turn to language service providers that provide on-demand interpreters. These interpreters conduct 3-way conference calls and facilitate conversation between English-speaking government staff and LEP individuals. The OPI industry has been in existence for nearly 30 years. During that time, technology has driven innovation, reduced connection times, and improved access to qualified, professionally trained interpreters in more than 170 different languages.

Automation connects interpreters faster than ever.

Numerous federal administrative centers and walk-in offices rely heavily on OPI language interpreters when serving the LEP public. Whether in the course of daily interactions or during emergency disaster response, fast and efficient access to interpreters is essential. Yet no matter how quickly agencies connect LEP individuals with interpreters, there is a constant demand to connect them even faster.

Fortunately, government agencies are now improving efficiency with advanced call routing systems that feature automation and interactive voice response (IVR) systems. IVR significantly reduces today's connection times. In fact, the most sophisticated systems operate 10 seconds faster, on average, than a live agent.

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Advanced speech recognition technology streamlines the process by allowing callers to answer multiple questions, in rapid succession, with quick verbal responses. Such technology includes more efficient and reliable, intelligent, grammar-based speech recognition that learns unique words, phrases, department names, and acronyms “on-the-fly” for use during subsequent calls. Enhanced IVR systems even feature male or female voices in a range of accents.

Leading language service providers leverage these systems to help agencies expedite calls, improve efficiency, and save money, all while improving LEP access to government programs and services.

Language providers use technology to go mobile.

Evolving demographics make communication with LEP populations more challenging, as each year passes. Nowhere is this more evident than within agencies responsible for emergency response. Responders often lack the necessary preparedness to overcome language barriers that they encounter on the streets, at disaster sites, and during other situations.

Law enforcement agencies hire bilingual dispatchers and field personnel, but the diverse range of languages makes having the right officer, in the right place, at the right time, highly unlikely. The same holds true for disaster relief efforts since people of multiple languages can be among those affected.

Forward-thinking language service providers, however, have devised some novel solutions to these problems. Since bringing the interpreter to the people isn't always an option, they're using technology to bring people to the interpreter.

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Emergency responders in some large metropolitan areas deploy dual-handset phones in vans that can be stationed or dispatched to anywhere in the city. These mobile units make it possible to quickly access interpreters and converse with LEP suspects, victims, and witnesses. Where these units are not available, responders and field agents can carry dedicated cell phones that provide similar rapid access to interpreters in virtually any language, at any time, day or night.

Representing the next evolution in OPI, the dual-handset phones and dedicated mobile devices are equally useful to relief agencies. They can be sent to disaster sites and provide interpreter assistance for responders delivering information, administering care, and reuniting lost family members.

Translation Management Systems

Online management makes translation fast and efficient.

The federal government spends over \$1 billion on language services including document translation annually.¹ Hoping to improve operational efficiency, the White House has called for “automatic, highly accurate and real-time translation among the major languages of the world — greatly lowering the barriers to international commerce and collaboration.”² While real-time computer translation is on the horizon, it’s still not 100% accurate. Nevertheless, other new technologies are helping to accelerate the translation process.

Web-based human translation remains the benchmark for fast, accurate translation. Today’s bottlenecks, however, typically occur in the form of ineffective management and visibility of diverse projects across multiple agencies. Overcoming these obstacles requires a comprehensive system that interfaces directly with every aspect of the translation workflow.

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Fortunately, some language service providers have an answer. They deploy Translation Management Systems (TMS) that integrate authoring, content, data, and workflow systems. Content Management Systems (CMS), Translation Memory (TM), and multi-term glossary systems deliver additional efficiency. Agency managers can now enjoy the simplicity of using a web-based dashboard interface to dispatch content to translator resources, monitor internal workflow, track progress by department or user, and make real-time adjustments, from anywhere in the world, 24/7.

By automating the translation process and enabling hands-on management, these sophisticated TMS solutions help agencies streamline workflow, shorten turn-around time, and reduce costs.

¹ “Language Services and the U.S. Federal Government” December, 2009 Common Sense Advisory, Inc.

² “Strategy for American Innovation” White House President Barack Obama September 21, 2009

Foreign Language Testing and Training

Testing and training bilingual staff online

As part of its commitment to improving service access to the LEP public, the federal government hires scores of bilingual employees. The cultural diversity of the federal workforce requires testing for both English and native language proficiency. Certainly training such a large bilingual workforce, and maintaining language proficiency is a critical and daunting challenge, especially when one considers that over 245 languages are spoken in the U.S. today.

Government agencies use various guidelines and standards to assess proficiency. The Department of Defense, for example, requires highly specialized levels of comprehension, fluency, and accuracy. Therefore, it employs strict Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) ratings. Administrative agencies, on the other hand, can rely on oral tests to measure proficiency, accuracy, and fluency. Yet administrative staffs must be well versed in a variety of topics and experienced with both formal and informal settings. Consequently, federal government agencies and the DoD need testing and training programs that are flexible enough to meet diverse mission standards and broad enough to address a range of applications.

Today's innovative language service providers offer web-based testing and training that feature self-paced, user-friendly learning modules. When more complex material is necessary, on-line instructors guide the interaction and provide more technical content and instruction. Meanwhile, self-assessment tools enable bilingual staff to focus on their individual needs.

Employees can access the programs from any location, at their convenience. This eliminates the need for travel and related expenses. Perhaps, most important, these programs can be tailored to meet the differing levels of efficiency, specialization, and cost-effectiveness required by each agency.

Effective communication is a fundamental requirement for any federal agency.

Specialist interpreters for complex situations

Effective communication is a fundamental requirement for any federal agency. For those agencies serving non-English speakers, it's even more vital. With the U.S. immigrant population continuing to climb, the ethnic minority is projected to become the majority by 2042.³ Hence, the government has little choice but to keep pace with our country's growing language diversity.

Today, bilingual employees are often called upon to bridge the language gap. Often, though, they simply aren't qualified to interpret complex information. Diplomatic, national security, court, medical, law enforcement, and emergency response interpreters must be trained to understand specialized terminology and to navigate inter-cultural obstacles.

³ "Population Reference Bureau" May 2009

The need for specialized training is perhaps most vital in the healthcare environment where communication can have life-altering consequences. Interpreters impact the lives of LEP individuals, every day, in areas beyond those listed above. The use of interpreters with specialized training ensures that these encounters will have positive outcomes.

While not prevalent, there are language service providers that train interpreters with specialized curriculums. These programs often include the study of advanced terminology, familiarization with specific procedures, and role-playing for real-life situations. In some instances, interpreters receive certification in their specialized discipline.

With greater proficiency and highly refined skills, these interpreters are key to streamlining communication between government agencies and the LEP public. Whether at a clinic, in a courtroom, on the street, or at a walk-in office, specially trained interpreters are helping ensure access to all government services.

Summary

Given the federal government's growing demand for foreign language interpretation, language service trends and innovations are becoming increasingly relevant. This white paper is intended to highlight innovative approaches and programs that are being employed by today's leading language service providers.

The next white paper in this series will take a closer look at specific best practices within telephone interpreting. Language Line Services plans to provide this and subsequent white papers once every two to three months.

If you found this document pertinent and worthwhile and are interested in learning more, please feel free to contact Michael M. Meldon, Senior Director for Federal Affairs, Language Line Services at 703-212-9029 or mmeldon@languageline.com.



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