

# Machine Translation Software in Agencies' Websites and Mobile Apps

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Office of Human Rights  
District of Columbia

## Purpose:

The Language Access (LA) Program accepts the use of Machine Translation (MT) Softwares with the contingency that the agency has a justified reason for using such technology. Furthermore, the agency must contact the Chief Technology Officer at the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) for consultation on the development of the agency's website translation. Please contact OCTO at [webteam@dc.gov](mailto:webteam@dc.gov) through [webteam.dc.gov](http://webteam.dc.gov).

The implementation guidelines included in the following sections are approved by the Office of Human Rights Language Access Program.

## Automated MT software background:

It is important to understand the modus operandi of automated translation technology. The machine translation algorithms save words and their relative positions as the probability that they may occur together, creating a statistical estimate of the translations of similar sentences. Therefore, the algorithmic systems do not interpret words' meaning, context, and intention as a human translator does.

Note that Google Translate, WeGlot, ChatGPT, DeepL, and other automated MT software features do not extend to embedded/linked documents, creating a barrier to equitable access to crucial information for the LEP/NEP community. To avoid liability issues, inaccurate/erroneous translations, and the spread of misinformation, it is advised that the documents are professionally translated and include a quality assurance process before embedding the translated documents/links.

Recent evidence from different research reports and studies shows that MT<sup>1</sup>, particularly Google Translate, produces materially less accurate results when translated from English into several other languages, particularly non-European languages.

Also, it has been noted that automated translations fall short in understanding social media posts, and in particular, the machine translation tools raise further concerns when it translates into languages that don't use Roman characters, requiring an extra layer of quality control to ensure that the translations are accurate.

## Basis for position:

Recent data<sup>1</sup> shows that the price of cutting corners in terms of the cost of translation service can carry a long tail impact on the quality of the translations. A critical aspect of machine

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<sup>1</sup>UCLA and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center Study published in 2021.

translation is that it does not work well with idioms, cultural nuance, different dialects, and slang.

A PBS news weekend report and interview with the Respond Crisis organization on May 7, 2023, highlights the pitfalls of the risk of using translation technology in languages like Afghan, Pashto, and Dari that struggle to translate idioms or specific dialects.<sup>2</sup> This report also noted that the Respond Crisis has seen several instances of mistranslations in critical asylum documents that can seriously jeopardize the case of completely invalidating them.

### **Recommendation:**

Although the LA program does not recommend or endorse the use of Google Translate or other automated Machine Translation (MT) software or Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, we understand it is one of the most efficient methods to provide multilingual access with most agencies' limited technical resources.

Based on the global health pandemic, the District of Columbia's Executive Office of the Mayor used Google Translate, as seen on the COVID-19 emergency response page. It has been noted that this type of hybrid website is effective when an agency's website content is constantly changing/updating.

In sampling websites, we have found that for a hybrid website to be effective, it must have the following elements:

- High visibility of Google Translates or other automated Machine Translation software (icon) to ensure accessibility of language services
- Professional translation of embedded/ linked documents (pdf, editable pdf file)
- Title of the linked vital document translations should be translated in the translated language along with the English title. See examples:<sup>3</sup>
  - [Solicitud en Español \(Spanish online application\)](#)
  - [Renovate Right! Tip Sheet for Preventing Lead Exposure](#)  
[¡Pinte correctamente! Consejos para prevenir la exposición al plomo](#)
- Ensure that the translations by MT/AI software are reviewed go through a human validation process also known as qualified human translators, as per the Department of Justice's December 2021 guidelines<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-language-translation-technology-is-jeopardizing-afghan-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>3</sup>"Spanish (Español). Accessed September 19, 2023. <https://doee.dc.gov/node/714902>.

<sup>4</sup>DOJ December 2021 Publication: Improving Access to Public Websites and Digital Services for LEP person.

The LAP also found that agencies are bypassing the use of embedded translated documents and instead placing the original English only content on their website to maximize MT/AI function. This is due to the MT/AI's inability to extend the translation feature to documents that are not in a readable format. Should an agency take this approach to provide equitable access on its website to the LEP/NEP community, it is advised to:

- Ensure that the translations by MT/AI software are reviewed go through a human validation process also known as qualified human translators, as per the Department of Justice's December 2021 guidelines<sup>5</sup>.

**It is strongly advised that an agency also include a disclaimer:**

#### **OCTO recommendation for disclaimer**

The text of this website was prepared in English and has been translated using Google Translate. No automated translation is perfect. This translation is provided "as is." The DC government makes no warranty of any kind, either express or implied, as to the accuracy, reliability, or correctness of this translation.

The attribution requirements for Google Translate require that we provide the following additional disclaimer language, without modification:

**The following text must remain in all caps:**

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**Additional Disclaimers (if applicable):**

- No warranty of any kind, expressed or implied, is made regarding the accuracy, reliability, or correctness of any translations made from <source language> into any other language. Some content (such as images, videos, Flash, etc.) may not be accurately translated due to the limitations of the translation software.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://slate.com/technology/2022/09/machine-translation-accuracy-government-danger.html>  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-language-translation-technology-is-jeopardizing-afghan-asylum-seekers>  
<https://restofworld.org/2023/ai-translation-errors-afghan-refugees-asylum/>  
<https://digital.gov/2012/10/01/automated-translation-good-solution-or-not/>