



ARDS

Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc.

This information has been produced to help users of Yolŋu Radio understand some of the issues related to translation messages for use in broadcasting.

Working Between Languages

Many Yolŋu¹ people speak English as a fifth or sixth language. This means they think and process information in Yolŋu Matha not English. Yet most information and education aimed at Yolŋu is delivered in English, which means Yolŋu must first struggle to comprehend a foreign language and then struggle to relate the information being taught to their own view and knowledge of the world (worldview). As a result of this double effort; Yolŋu will often miss out on 95% of the information and education aimed at them.

If real learning, understanding or communication is to occur, then educational material and messages must be produced in the language of the people.

Ingredients for Good Translating & Understanding

Producing material in the language of the people is a complex process which demands **highly trained individuals²** who:

- can speak both languages
- can understand and identify with both cultures and worldviews
- have a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter being taught
- are conscious of the complexities that surround translation work³.

For commonly used languages such as English, French, Indonesian and Japanese, there are many trained individuals who could do this work independently. However, for original Australian languages such as Yolŋu Matha, there are very few trained individuals who can effectively translate at the present time.

We know that the work between English and other European languages has been researched and documented by countless scholars throughout history. Translation work between Japanese, Chinese and English languages was started over 400 years ago by Jesuit Priests. Even for many Pacific Islanders the research between their languages and English has been ongoing for over 140 years. As a result of this extensive work, the development of a deep corporate knowledge base and refined language resources such as cross-referenced and comprehensive two-way dictionaries has been made possible for these languages. In contrast, the research between Yolŋu Matha and English has been on and off for just over 60 years and language resource development is only in its infancy.

When translating work is required between Yolŋu Matha and English, there is often a great deal of new research required to deal with concepts that have never been translated between the two languages before. This is necessary to achieve an accurate and meaningful translation and to support the ongoing development of Yolŋu Matha language resources.

The ARDS Language Service takes the development of these language resources very seriously and a small group of professionals continue to work on dictionaries and other learning tools to bridge the gap. See: ards.com.au/language.htm

Private and corporate donations are invaluable in supporting this important work.

When Translating Between Languages

Rule of Thumb: Translation between Yolŋu Matha and English takes much longer than it does between English and many of the European languages. In most cases the finished Yolŋu Matha message will be much longer than the original English script.

Why is this?

When we go to translate something from one language to another we need to check whether the content to be translated is simple, tangible language (basic instructional language), or more complex concept language (cognitive affective language).

Basic Instructional Language

Basic instructional language is sometimes called 'school yard' language. It is the tangible language that describes things that we can see, touch and smell. Many times this language can be explained with a picture. For example, for words like sun, tree, walk, rough and putrid or phrases like, "I am hungry" or "That is my house over there". Basic instructional language words and phrases usually have direct equivalents in all other languages and are very easy to translate.

Cognitive Affective Language

Cognitive affective language is the more complex concept language that cannot be seen, touched or smelt. This language can only create a 'picture' in the mind through what is heard by our ears.

What makes it more difficult is that speakers of different languages encode different sounds with different meaning in their minds. So the same sound can give people of different language groups a different picture or no picture at all.

Some sounds in some languages cannot even be heard by other people who cannot speak or hear that particular language well. Everyone, except hearing impaired people, has hard wiring dendrite growths in their brains that have developed from the day they were born and started hearing their parents and others around them speak. These first family languages become the language that their brain thinks in and encodes information in. So when a person hears a particular sound or word they get a particular picture, image or understanding in their minds *depending on the language they speak*.

It is true that anyone can learn another language, but the ability to do so becomes more difficult as we get older. So if we want to communicate effectively with Yolŋu people, and elders and leaders in particular, we need to communicate with them in their own language otherwise we will just create confusion and misunderstanding.

Traditional Aboriginal Languages: As complex as English

Yolŋu Matha is an extremely complex language. Its grammar is complicated and rich concepts continue to be discovered almost weekly by the English speaking world. Research is central to documenting these concepts and thereby improving the quality, number and speed of translations.

The richness and complexity of Yolngu Matha makes it an extremely good teaching and communication language, particularly around difficult subjects, as it enables very fast and very comprehensive transfer of information to Yolngu people⁴.

Translating Rich English Scripts

When translating pamphlets, policy statements, press releases and other concise or rich English scripts, we need to remember that it has often taken days, weeks and or even months to produce the original text in English. This is because the writers want the message to be well understood and not misinterpreted by the English speaking audience. 'Rich' English scripts, however, present difficulties when translating into one of the original Australian languages. This is due to a number of reasons:

- Often there are multiple concepts contained within each sentence. Each concept must be examined to discover the relevant concept in Yolngu Matha. This process is vital to creating an accurate and meaningful translation⁵.
- When working at the concept level of languages there are rarely direct equivalents in other languages.
- As already mentioned, there is insufficient research, language documentation and resources, as well as a limited translation history to rapidly and concisely translate whole concepts from Yolngu Matha into English and vice versa.
- traditional Aboriginal people have not had the exposure (either historically through industrial or technological history or geographically through daily access in their lives on communities) to many contemporary subjects (e.g. security cameras, EFTPOS, radio transmission, DNA), so these concepts can be completely new to them. Any messages relating to such contemporary concepts must be comprehensively explained so the meaning will *rarralkunhamirr* (reveal itself).

These difficulties should not be seen as a deterrent for governments and Indigenous support agencies. This is the normal process of chartering and maintaining languages and should therefore receive full support from the relevant authorities.

Information is power and language research is the only way for Yolngu and other Indigenous people who speak English as a fifth or sixth language to have open and free access to mainstream information and knowledge systems.

Not only does comprehensive translation work empower and enrich Yolngu, but every time we translate and produce material in Yolngu Matha, we add to the collective knowledge and resources that exists between English – Yolngu Matha – English.

ARDS stands ready to offer a service to anyone who requires messages and material translated from English to Yolngu Matha. We would be happy to give you a quote for this work.

Please donate to this important work and help us to build a bigger team of professionals to create dictionaries and other language resources for an original Australian language, Yolngu Matha.

Example 1

In 2007 while working on Audio Education programs ARDS discovered that the English word, 'rights' was a problem for Yolŋu Matha speakers. So much so that even professional Yolŋu people did not understand the real meaning behind the word. There are eight definitions for the English word, 'right' and whilst some Yolŋu had two or three of these meanings, none had the correct understanding for the English word 'rights'. So we created a radio program on the meaning of the word 'rights' and now all Yolŋu people have access to this understanding and the other information this understanding opens up.

Example 2

Quote taken from an information pamphlet on health:

Palliative Care is active care that aims to promote comfort when cure is no longer possible.

There are three major concepts in this sentence:

- *Palliative Care*
English speaking people can look up a dictionary to understand this term. To date Yolŋu have no English to Yolŋu Matha dictionary that covers this term.
- *aims to promote comfort*
Within this phrase there are three difficult English words that makes up a difficult concept.
- *when cure is no longer possible*
There is one difficult word "cure" in this phrase, but the whole phrase creates a difficult concept.

Another reason these particular concepts are more difficult to translate is that the Yolŋu people consider the care of a dying person as a very personal thing and so they care for dying people themselves rather than placing dying people in institutions. So, when translating concepts the worldview needs to be dealt with, along with the particular meaning of the words.

When all these things are considered a pamphlet is not enough to explain these major concepts for Yolŋu people. ARDS had to create a number of ten minute education programs to adequately explain this one English sentence.

Example 3

Quote taken from a media release:

Acquiring townships prescribed by the Australian Government through five year leases including payment of just terms compensation.

There are six major concepts in this sentence:

- *Acquiring townships*
- *Prescribed*
- *the Australian Government*
- *through five year leases*
- *payment of just terms*
- *compensation*

Each of these concepts involves accurately defining the English terminology and context, then researching and exploring related terminology and concepts in the relevant Aboriginal language, then constructing the text in that Aboriginal language, then finally verifying the resulting text with sufficient appropriately trained translators to ensure accurate meaning.

This all takes time, so for an accurate meaningful text your patience and understanding is welcomed.

1 The term Yolŋu means person or human. It can also mean people and humans. At times we will use the term “Yolŋu people” for ease of reading as most English speakers find it very hard to see the term Yolŋu as for both person and people. Today the term Yolŋu is also used to mean the Aboriginal people of north-east Arnhem Land.

2 Both trained Yolŋu Matha first language and English first language professionals are needed to work together as no Yolŋu person or English first language person can fully understand the other language and culture to the degree that is necessary at the present time.

3 Some people make the mistake of just grabbing any Yolŋu person who can speak and read English to a degree and expect them to be able to translate or even interpret English messages or information. This is a big mistake and is usually setting the Yolŋu person up to fail.

There are a number of reasons for this. Yolŋu people, like anybody else, do not know what they do not know. An understanding of your ability or lack of it usually comes from intensive training or severe embarrassment, so without intensive training in translation work and checking mechanisms in the translation process, there can be little certainty about the accuracy or meaningfulness of the translation. At present there are no comprehensive training programs available for potential Yolŋu translators as governments do not see the need for it.

Secondly most English speaking people use two forms of English language without even knowing it. For example they use a *spoken English* and a *written English*. Many people would remember their mothers or teachers saying to them, “You can say that, but you cannot write that.” Written English uses different grammatical constructions from spoken English, and usually condenses concepts into shorter blocks of language. In other words, in written language, there are more concepts conveyed with fewer words. Through a very intensive cultural process most English speakers have learnt written English without even consciously knowing that it is very different from spoken English.

However Yolŋu people, except for a small minority, do not know these differences in their own language as the same cultural process has not occurred with them. So an untrained Yolŋu person can sit down and translate what they personally think is good. They will understand it because they were in context to the information while they were translating it. However another Yolŋu person, third party to the process, needs more contextual detail when reading the same script. This contextual detail is created by the ‘correct’ Yolŋu Matha written grammar that the untrained Yolŋu person might not know. So the message, sign, pamphlet or education material might be in Yolŋu Matha, but it cannot be read or understood by a third party Yolŋu Matha speaker because the context is not clear. Only trained professionals should be used in this process.

In lieu of comprehensive training programs a teaming interpreting process should be used. That is a trained Yolŋu Matha first language speaker working together with a trained English first language speaker. This is the process used by ARDS in the production of audio education programs for Yolŋu Radio.

4 Yolŋu Matha is very rich in concepts like economics and law. In fact, Yolŋu Matha has economic concepts that English does not have. However, contemporary subject concepts are lacking and Yolŋu Matha speakers need to import the English concepts just as English has had to import many of these same contemporary concepts into English from other languages and other language roots.

This does not corrupt or hinder the communication process between English and Yolŋu Matha as long as the full translation process occurs. The sad part is that government and large corporate organisations, some of which take many billions of dollars worth of resources away from Yolŋu lands, play no real role in helping or resourcing this language transfer, research and learning.

5 To avoid the message of the script being "lost in translation", the full meaning of the thought or concept behind the script needs to be translated in a way where it is properly received across cultures. Simply offering a word-for-word translation of the script will not suffice because literal translations will not convey what is trying to be said in one language to another.

To make it more complicated many words in the English language have multiple meanings. Take for example the word, 'right': "that's right." "that is the right way to speak." "right in the middle" "that is not right" "right down the end of the road" – such words can distort the message being translated if that particular meaning of that word in relation to its context in a sentence is not understood. Those who speak English as a first language, should not be surprised at how many English words have multiple meanings. Try looking at the following words in an English dictionary; "up" "make" "president".

Secondly, when translating various concepts from one language to another, we are dealing with non-tangible words that usually have no direct, semantic equivalent in either language. This is especially so if the languages involved in cross-translation stem from great cultural and geographical divides such as those that exist between the English language (originating in Europe) and an original Australian language like Yolŋu Matha.