TRANSLATION SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGIES IN THE NHS

A REPORT BY THE CENTRE FOR TRANSLATION STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

CONTEXT

Recent investigations have linked various cases of patient deaths and complications to poor multilingual communication practices, as NHS staff struggle to find effective solutions to communicate with members of the public with limited English proficiency.[1, 2]

Over August and November 2023, the Centre for Translation Studies (CTS) sent a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all NHS trusts in England (210 organisations), consisting of questions relating to their use of professional translation and interpreting services, machine translation (MT), as well as measures taken to ensure the safe and responsible use of such tools. This report outlines some of the key findings of this study.
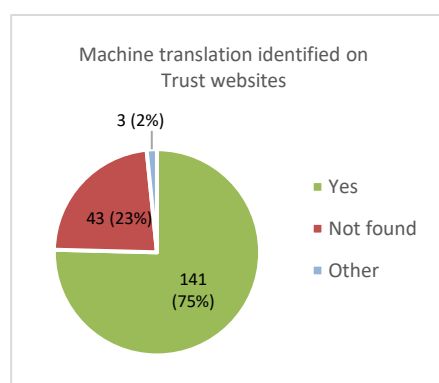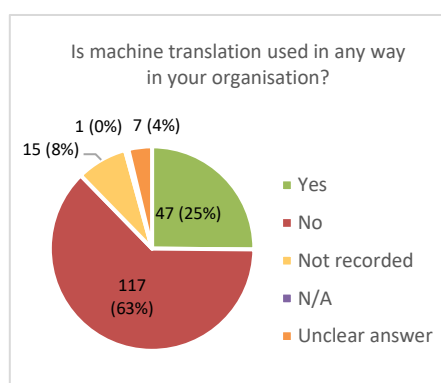
THE CURRENT PICTURE OF TRANSLATION IN THE NHS

Professional translation and interpreting services

■ All but 2 (7%) of the 187 respondents stated that they work with professional translation or interpreting services. The circumstances of their use vary from trust to trust.

Machine translation

■ Only a quarter of NHS trusts reported using machine translation (MT), e.g. a translation app such as Google Translate.

■ However, three quarters of the trusts' websites use some form of MT.

Is machine translation used in any way in your organisation?

1 (0%)   7 (4%)
15 (8%)
47 (25%)
117 (63%)

■ Yes
■ No
■ Not recorded
■ N/A
■ Unclear answer

Machine translation identified on Trust websites

3 (2%)
43 (23%)
141 (75%)

■ Yes
■ Not found
■ Other

KEY RESEARCH FINDING

The vast majority of the responding NHS trusts rely on professional translation and interpreting services, but they also use machine translation (MT).

However, in most cases, MT is used without any formal policy, any risk assessment or training for its appropriate use, revealing a lack of preventative measures against potential risks to NHS patients and staff.

NHS POLICY ON THE USE OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

The NHS Guidance for Commissioners: Interpreting and Translation Services in Primary Care, states, "*Automated on-line translating systems or services such as "Google-translate" should be avoided as there is no assurance of the quality of the translations*". However, when asked whether they follow any policy regarding MT, only one NHS trust mentioned this document.
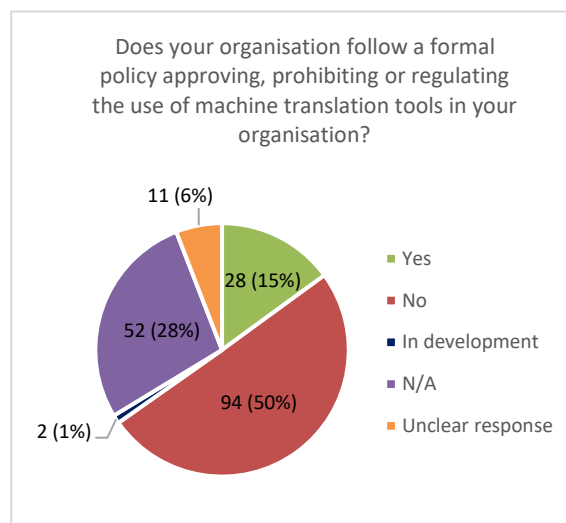
Policies

- Despite at least 141 (75%) trusts using MT, just 28 (15%) reported following a formal policy for such use.
- Numerous trusts referenced translation and interpreting policies but only 10 (5%) of the policies provided mention MT specifically.

Risk assessment

- Only 9 (5%) trusts have completed a risk assessment of the use of MT, but several trusts acknowledge existing risks related to accuracy and information protection.

Training

- Just 8 (4%) respondents said they had any kind of training for the use of MT.

Does your organisation follow a formal policy approving, prohibiting or regulating the use of machine translation tools in your organisation?

11 (6%)
28 (15%)
52 (28%)
2 (1%)
94 (50%)

- Yes
- No
- In development
- N/A
- Unclear response

Line of accountability

- Should any negative outcomes occur from the use of MT, only 37 (20%) of the trusts indicated having an established line of accountability that they would follow. These included references to the trusts' incident reporting processes, working with their Patient Experience and Complaints Teams or their translation providers. None of these make specific reference to MT.

MANAGEMENT OF RISK AND ACCOUNTABILITY

While efforts are being made by NHS trusts to facilitate multilingual communication, there is a significant lack of prior investigation, preparation and awareness regarding the best methods to use machine translation tools.

Insufficient mitigation measures to guide NHS staff increase the risk of unsafe practices, potentially resulting in serious consequences for patients, staff and wasting valuable NHS resources in the process.

Changes are imperative to fill these gaps and protect those that are vulnerable. This calls for proactive implementation of effective communication procedures that protect patients and staff. Clear lines of accountability can then be put in place, ensuring responsible communication across languages in the NHS.

Research Team

If you would like to learn more about this research, please contact Félix do Carmo (f.docarmo@surrey.ac.uk) and Sarah Herbert (s.herbert@surrey.ac.uk).

References:
1) https://slate.com/technology/2022/09/machine-translation-accuracy-government-danger.html
2) https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001sm8z