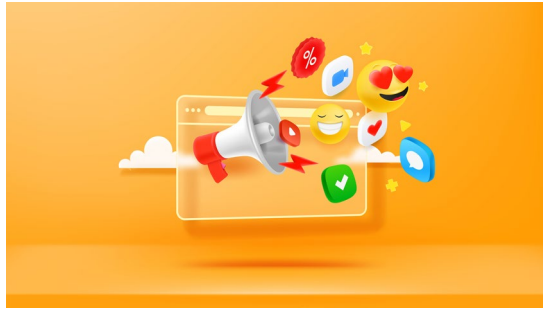


# AI TRANSLATION IN CRITICAL SERVICES

Lucas Nunes Vieira

School of Modern Languages

# 'Everyday' use of machine translation 2019 UK survey



# **‘Everyday’ use of machine translation 2019 UK survey**

“I use them to explain patients rights who are detained under the mental health act. It is important they have accurate information and an interpreter told me once that the written inform[a]tion I had been given by google translate was almost unintelligible”

(mental health advocate)

Vieira, L.N., O’Sullivan, C., Zhang, X. *et al.* Machine translation in society: insights from UK users. *Lang Resources & Evaluation* **57**, 893–914 (2023).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10579-022-09589-1>

# 2019 Literature Review


INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY  
2021, VOL. 24, NO. 11, 1515–1532  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1776370>

 **Routledge**  
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## Understanding the societal impacts of machine translation: a critical review of the literature on medical and legal use cases

Lucas Nunes Vieira <sup>a</sup>, Minako O'Hagan<sup>b</sup> and Carol O'Sullivan<sup>a</sup>

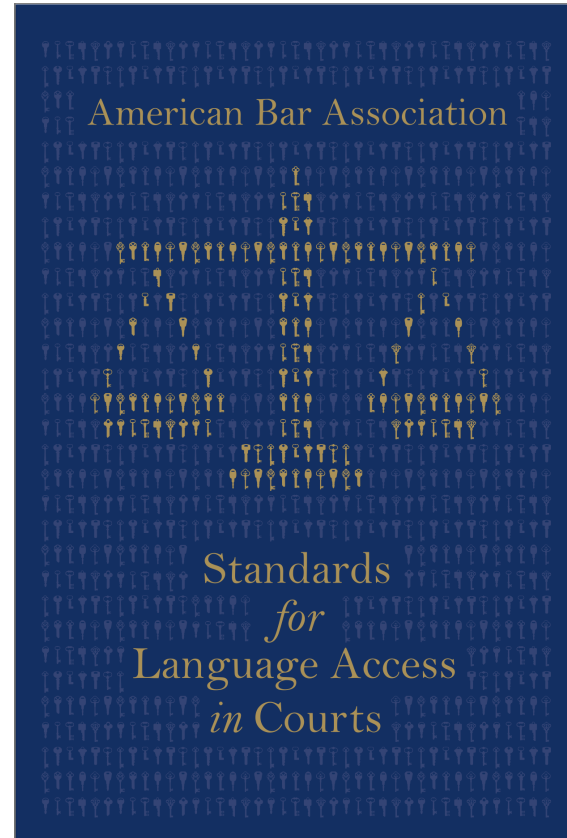
<sup>a</sup>School of Modern Languages, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

‘Because Plaintiffs provided no translation of any Polish documents submitted in support of their motion, the Court used the free “Google Translate” service, available at [translate.google.com](https://translate.google.com), in order to confirm certain statements’  
*(SUPER EXPRESS USA PUBLISHING CORP. v. SPRING PUBLISHING CORP, 2017)*

Vieira, LN O’Hagan, M & O’Sullivan, C (2021) Understanding the societal impacts of machine translation: a critical review of the literature on medical and legal use cases, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:11, 1515-1532, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2020.1776370](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1776370)

# ABA Standards for Language Access (2012)

‘Courts should use caution when considering any kind of machine translation, as it has been found to be “unacceptably unreliable” in its current format’ (p. 86)



# Frontline policing



'Cop fails at using google translate to speak to Vietnamese man,' TikTok, 2024, accessed 17 November 2025, [https://www.tiktok.com/@zoe\\_boy\\_nation/video/7402272216483695915](https://www.tiktok.com/@zoe_boy_nation/video/7402272216483695915); 'It's not a high five moment,' Facebook, 2024, accessed 17 November 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/bangkokpost/videos/its-not-a-high-five-moment/1172492890463713/>.

# Google Translate use by US police officers

## Motions to suppress evidence

- United States v. Gonzalez-Moreno, 8:23CR02 (D. Neb. Jul. 17, 2023)
- United States v. Ramirez-Mendoza 4:20-CR-00107 (M.D. Pa. Oct. 1, 2021)
- United States v. Garcia-Garcia 957 F.3d 887 (8th Cir. 2020)
- United States v. Cruz-Zamora 318 F. Supp. 3d 1264 (D. Kan. 2018)
- United States v. Salas Antuna, WL 2255565 (S.D. Tex. May 23, 2017)

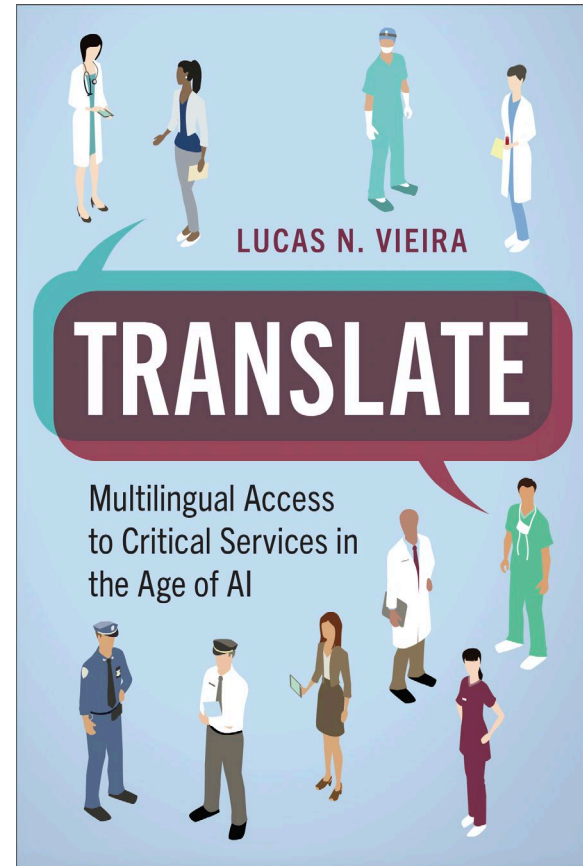
The officer “admitted a live interpreter would be a more reliable source” United States v. Cruz-Zamora 318 F. Supp. 3d 1264, 11 (D. Kan. 2018)

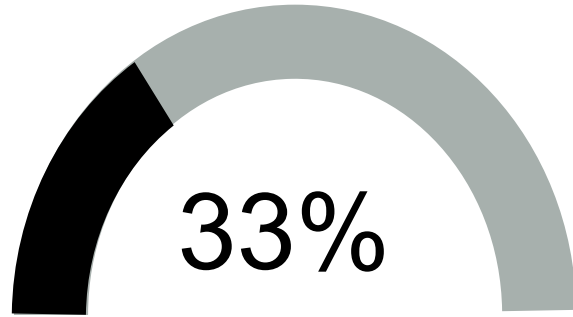


Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

- **UK survey: Feb–Apr 2024**
  - 2,520 professionals
  - Healthcare, social care/services, emergency services, legal services, the police
- **Interviews: Nov–Dec 2024**
  - 18 social workers
  - Child protection, adult services, mental health

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Had used machine/AI translation at work



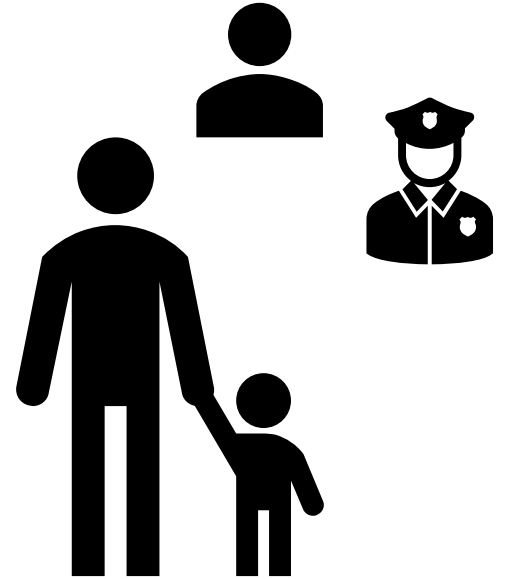
# Plugging gaps

- Telling the time
- Giving directions around the hospital
- Small talk
- While waiting for interpreters

‘I needed to communicate with pregnant women and their families in Polish and Urdu in order to give them some basic information (i.e., what time their taxi was coming, where they needed to be for their next appointment, what time it was and so on). This was because they were migrant families who hadn’t been given any NHS support during the pregnancy to that point, so we were piecing things together for them.’  
(public health lead)

# Plugging gaps

- The police go to a parent's home to carry out an arrest
- A social worker is asked to attend
- It's a last-minute operation
- The parent does not speak English
- Finding a phone interpreter takes 30–40min



# Dynamic risks

“I need to get food or drink orders of [patients], it's very hard to find out what they want to eat without talking. We don't have pictures and if they can't read English and point or understand spoken English then I use translation apps to help get the basics across. One for getting something nice for someone to eat, but also helps to find out if they can't eat something for allergy or religion via it.”  
(food service assistant)

“Confirming appointment dates and times, understanding medical complaint”  
(care coordinator)

# Misuses

‘to translate our informed consent forms and to ensure that the customer understood and could give informed consent [...]’ (healthcare managing director)

‘consenting for a procedure, giving advice on treatment and or medicine’ (advanced nurse practitioner)



# Misuses

‘A patient who speaks very limited English requiring medical help, post op [i.e., after an operation], with medication counselling, prescribing and dosing information [...]’  
(pharmacy technician)

‘We would use Google Translate for more complex medical jargon when screening patient fitness’ (nurse)

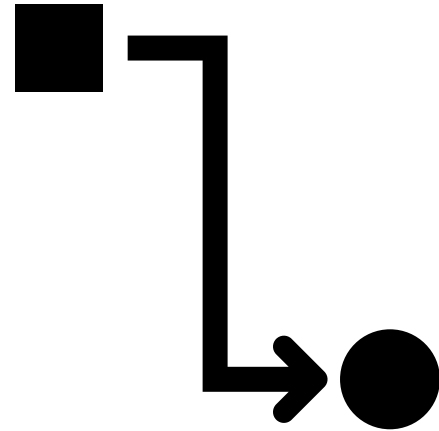
‘[...] trying to translate foreign medical records to code into NHS health record’ (practice operations manager)

‘when gathering evidence and speaking to witnesses’ (sergeant)



# Direct AI use motivators

- Service user preferences
- Conceptions of person-centred care
- Urgency
- Unreliable language services



# Direct AI use motivators

‘I was talking to a patient about testing for infections and explaining about window periods for testing. His English was good but there was some confusion as to what exactly I was trying to explain. I offered a telephone interpreter, which he declined, asking instead to use Google Translate to translate a small amount of information to help gain complete understanding.’ (sexual health advisor)



# Direct AI use motivators

'[...] unfortunately, sometimes when we outsource interpreters to provide language support to our clients in a counselling session, they don't show up, without any notice. This has happened several times. In some cases, I have been able to verbally explain to the client. In other cases, the client has zero English and therefore I have had to use Google Translate to type out a message to explain the situation to them.'

(counsellor, health care and social assistance)

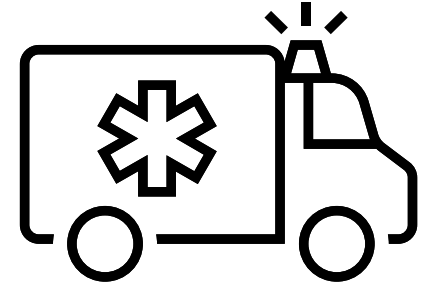
# Direct AI use motivators

'[...] it's incredibly time consuming, the phones in the department don't have great signal and often aren't clear to hear, and sometimes it takes ten minutes just to find a cordless handset with which to make the call. It's also a really unnatural way of communicating and makes it difficult to clarify points or speak about sensitive information.'  
(emergency medicine doctor)



# Human error

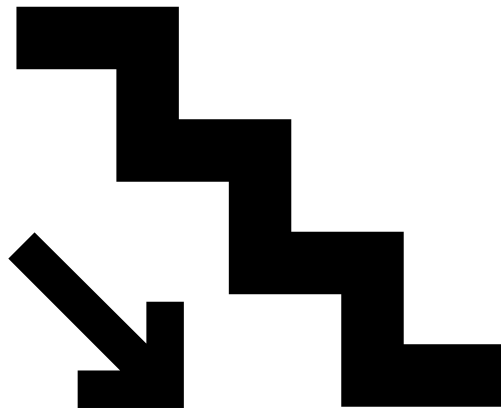
- On 12 April 2011, a Spanish-speaking man called 911 in Portland, Oregon. His wife was having breathing difficulties.
- When asked for the address, the interpreter got the postcode wrong.
- The ambulance was sent to the wrong address. The woman stopped breathing while waiting.
- The family sought US\$3 million in compensation



Aimee Green, 'Spanish interpreter botched 9-1-1 translation, sent ambulance to wrong address, \$3 million suit claims,' *The Oregonian/OregonLive*, 14 April 2014, [https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2014/04/spanish\\_interpreter\\_botched\\_9-.html](https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2014/04/spanish_interpreter_botched_9-.html).

# Downward harmonisation

- 'AI was better than professional translators in our evaluation exercise'
- 'Humans are not safe either'
- **Lowering standards and expectations**
- **Long-term deskilling**



# Some hard truths

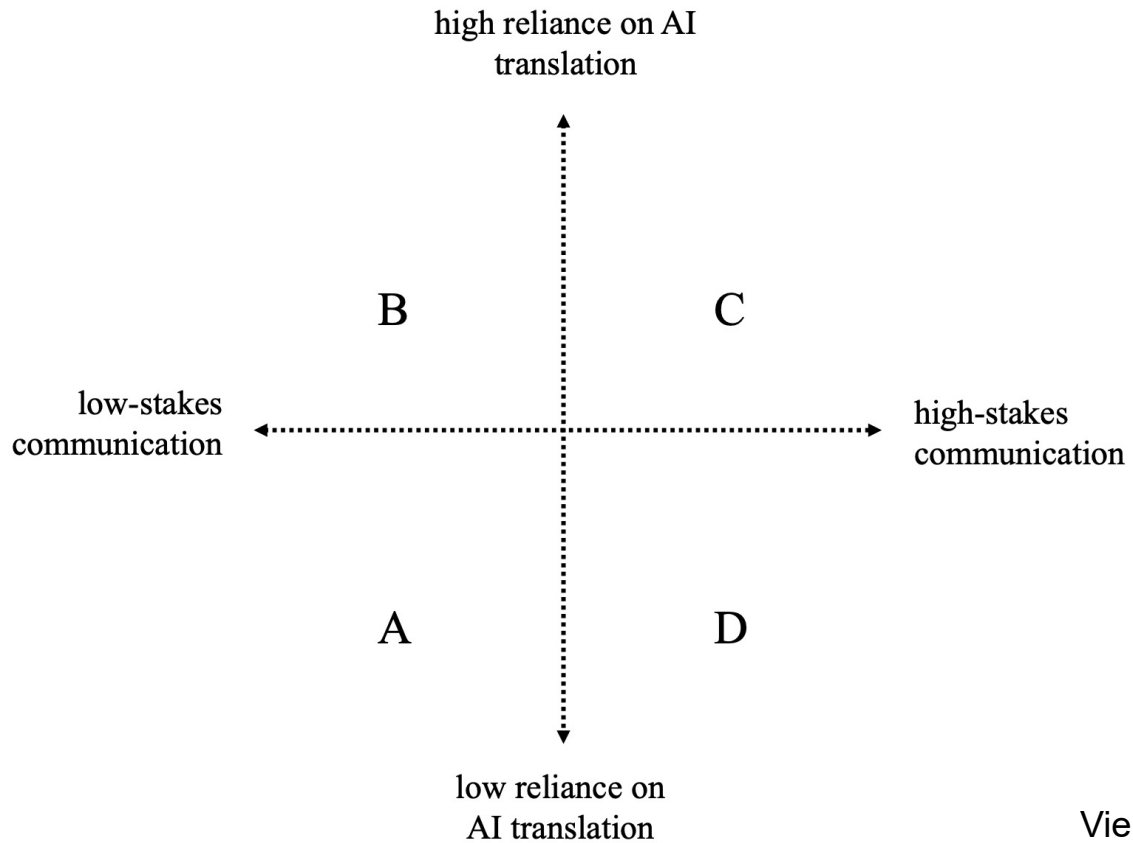
- Competent language professionals are not guaranteed to be available for every language/dialect
- Where language professionals are harder to find, AI is more likely to fail
- Where AI is used only for what is harder to understand, it is more likely to be wrong

# So where to from here?

Recognising dynamic risks and benefits

- Under-use
- Appropriate use
- Misuse





Vieira (2026)

# So where to from here?

Information's:

1. Stability
2. Urgency
3. Audience size
4. Intended or potential legal value

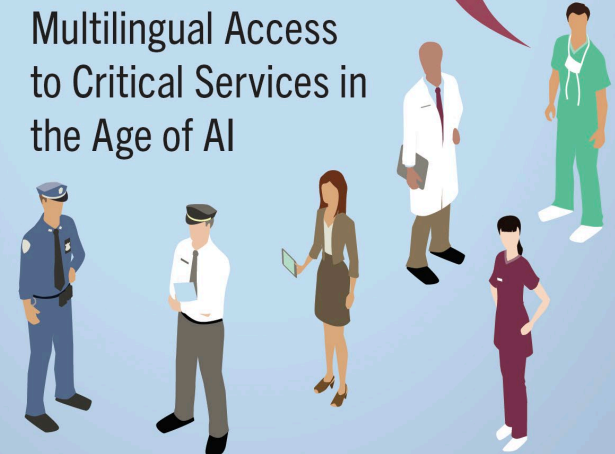
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# TRANSLATE

Multilingual Access  
to Critical Services in  
the Age of AI



# So where to from here?

AI uses ideally:

5. Outweigh non-use risks
6. Transparent
7. Consensual

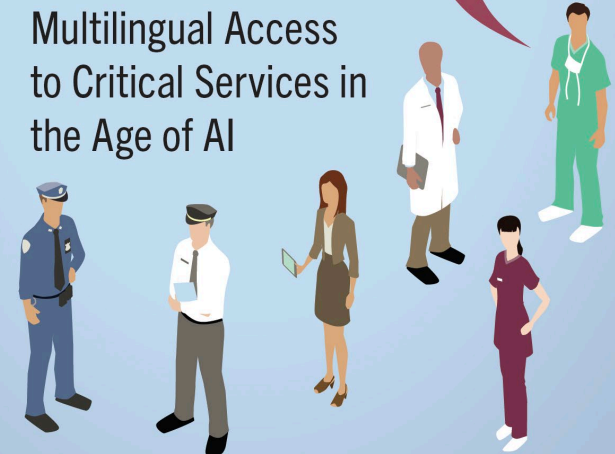
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# So where to from here?

Also important:

8. Complementation
9. Plain language

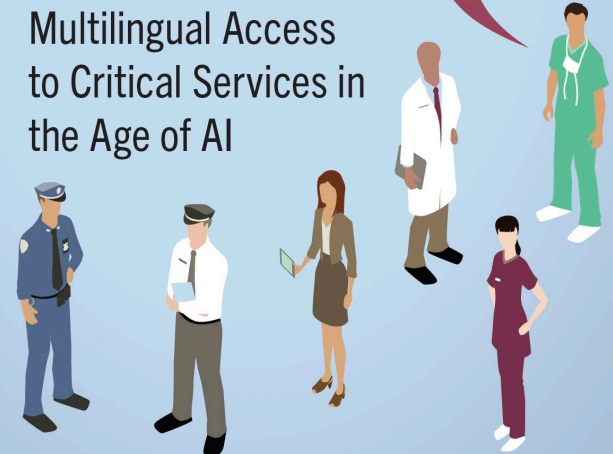
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**THANK YOU!**

