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A Decision for Research Teams**

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Co-opting or valuing the Indigenous voice through translation? A decision for research teams

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Abstract

Although te reo Māori is an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand, translation of research material such as information sheets, consent forms and questionnaires into te reo Māori remains highly variable. Translation tends to occur in research projects where Māori lead the work and that exclusively focus on Māori communities and topics. Translations are not offered or undertaken as a matter of course for all research. As a team of Māori and Indigenous researchers working within the health sector, we believe that there are important questions that need to be explored around the practice of using Indigenous languages, rich in similes and metaphors, to convey English/Western concepts/constructs/ideologies. In this paper, we draw on the story of one project to deconstruct and challenge the hegemonic terms through which translation of research material occurs. We explore the messages that translated material sends to potential research participants.

We contend that the choice about whether to translate research material into te reo Māori is one that should be undertaken within a robust decision-making framework that considers the reasons for a translation and its impact on the participants. Translation should not be undertaken primarily to attract Māori participants, but should reliably signal that the research is being undertaken in a way that honours a Māori worldview.

Keywords

Māori; Indigenous; translation; ethics

Introduction

This paper is set within the context of a mixed-cultural research team who have minor or advisory-only roles on a project about colorectal cancer in Aotearoa New Zealand. The authors are all Indigenous, with three of Māori (the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) descent (Jacquie, Anna, and Rawiri) and one (Shemana) from Sri Lanka.

The colorectal cancer research project took a mixed method approach, utilising a researcher-assisted validated survey and personal interviews to capture information from people from a range of ethnicities



from the Aotearoa New Zealand population. Ethical approval for the study was granted through the Southern Health and Disability Ethics Committee (reference: 16/STH/167). While this project was not grounded in te ao Māori (the Māori world), the inclusion of Māori data is an important component of investigating population-based health outcomes.

This paper draws on snippets of conversations to recreate discussions that took place as we tried to decide whether the research materials associated with our project should be translated from English into te reo Māori (the Māori language). After deliberating on the te ao Māori context, we consider whether our decisions align with Shemana's experiences in Sri Lanka and further afield in the international Indigenous space.

Background

Aotearoa New Zealand came into contemporary existence with the signing of a treaty (Te Tiriti o Waitangi [Te Tiriti]) in 1840. Te Tiriti set the terms of engagement between the many tribes of the Indigenous Māori peoples and the Crown including colonial institutions, businesses and settlers. However, the first systemic problem with translations between te reo Māori and English is found within Te Tiriti because there are signed versions in both languages and the two versions differ significantly in key areas when interpreting the document (Waitangi Tribunal 2016). Importantly, the concepts of sovereignty and governance are confused between the versions and what constitutes a valued or treasured possession is meaningfully different in the Māori compared to the English version. These language-based differences in the understanding of concepts within Te Tiriti has been compounded by the many deliberate breaches of Te Tiriti by the Crown and persistent processes of colonisation that have been the cause of a great deal of pain and anger for Māori over the last 180 years (Berghan et al. 2017, Tawhai and Gray-Sharp 2011). Research in Aotearoa New Zealand operates in an environment where the motivation of Crown-based institutions (universities and health care services) is therefore often viewed with mistrust by Māori.

The Aotearoa New Zealand health system is inequitable for Māori, with significant disparities in access, diagnosis, treatment and outcomes (Robson and Harris 2007). From a research perspective, projects relating to improving Māori health are important to impact equity and therefore Māori participation and the inclusion of Māori researchers and advisors in university and government funder-based requirements for projects has increased in recent years.

However, in our experience the desire of Māori to participate in non-Māori led research can be limited, which can result in researchers being unable to attract the required number of participants for a western-centric sample size. Researchers sometimes use strategies to make their projects seem more meaningful to Māori, including the use of Māori imagery and language. The Māori language, however, is diverse, with different dialects arising from different tribal areas and this makes using the language and in particular translating documents not as straightforward as it may seem.

Jacque speaks:

In many conversations over the last decade, I have spoken to fluent te reo Māori speakers about how they learned the language. During those times I frequently heard variations of this: "I learned te reo Māori from when I was a baby, listening to the old people talking. I grew up speaking it. My cousin learned at uni after she left school. Sometimes she talks and I have no idea what she's saying." Alternatively, people would say, "I wouldn't say I was fluent. When the *kaumātua* (elders) speak I can't understand some of the words." My own experience of te reo Māori involves attending classes that were taught using the local tribal dialect. I not only found it difficult to understand the variations in words and sentences, I also resisted learning my own language in the dialect of an iwi (tribe) that is not my own. As an adult learner who has lived in their lands for almost two decades, I was surprised at my need to struggle against the teacher.

These interactions highlight the diversity within te reo Māori and therefore some of the challenges faced with providing an effective translation of complex English documents such as participant information sheets, consent forms and surveys.

Te Ara Tika (Hudson et al. 2010) provides a framework for health researchers working with Māori participants and communities. It sits alongside other guidelines for conducting ethical research, such as those published by the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation: Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori (2004) and Health Research Council of New Zealand (2010). These documents all highlight the importance of research teams that are recruiting Māori including investigators and advisors who have a good understanding of te reo Māori. They also assert that participants should have the opportunity to express themselves in te reo Māori if they wish. However, it is important to note that these documents do not suggest that research materials are translated into te reo Māori, but instead focus on the relationship between the research team and Māori participants. We suggest that there is a gap when it comes to guidelines for research teams about what is required at the interface between themselves as researchers and Māori as participants in relation to how te reo Māori is acknowledged and imbedded. Consideration of how diverse Māori participants perceive and understand research information in te reo Māori is also needed.

Defining translation: Lessons from te ao Māori

Writing this paper has involved taking a somewhat shallow dive into areas that we are not expert in, such as the nature of translation itself and the best-practice process of translating a validated survey.

Firstly, we had to consider what constitutes te reo (language) for Māori. A generic definition of language proposes that it is a culturally bound system of ‘verbal habits’ which are interconnected, symbolic, highly specialised and constantly changing (Nida 1991, 11). This fits with our collective understanding of te reo Māori; it is rich in symbolism and metaphor, has dialects and jargon, and is dynamic. New words are created and old ones repurposed to meet the demands of our contemporary lives. Native and fluent speakers of te reo Māori invoke whakataukī (proverbs) and *kīwaha* (idioms), they use pūrākau (stories) and whakapapa (genealogy), and they speak directly about an issue only after these practices have been used to gather their audience together in shared anticipation. Our understanding of te reo is far more complex than the words and phrases that make up the Māori language. Nida’s definition includes the term ‘culturally bound’, meaning that terms are so tied to their own time and place they have to be placed into a greater context before they can be translated into another language (Dictionary.com). One example is a t-shirt that Jacquie wears sometimes; it has the combination of English and Māori words ‘be autaiā’ on the front. The most likely translation the maker of the shirt intended is ‘be extraordinary’. However, it can also mean to be ‘pretty good’, or ‘a problem’. All these translations are technically correct, but it takes the wider context of knowing that the shirt is a part of a university campaign to empower Māori academics before the first definition can be accepted.

We would take Nida’s (1991) definition a little further by adding that some terms are so embedded and embodied by a culture that no amount of a wider context would be sufficient for an effective translation. One of those terms, *taonga*, appears in te Tiriti and has been the focus of generations of cross-cultural misunderstandings. The English version of te Tiriti lists “Lands and Estates Forests Fisheries and other properties” in Article Two in a clear indication that tangible belongings are under discussion when the term *taonga* is used. However, the Māori version lists “*o ratou wenua o ratou kainga me o ratou taonga katoa*”, meaning their land (wenua/whenua), their homes (kainga), and all their treasures (taonga katoa) (Kawharu 1989). *Taonga* is therefore defined as property and goods, but also “anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomenon, ideas and techniques” (Māori Dictionary). *Taonga* is a frequently used word in te reo, referring to a person, an ornament, an idea, health, a gathering, the environment and even the air. There is a world of difference between a tangible object, such as land, and the intangible nature of anything that is *considered to be* of value. Of course, there are further issues about whose opinion about value should be paramount and what value means as a concept. This illustrates one of the difficulties encountered when a translation is under consideration.

We turn now to the act of translating a text. The definition of translation differs according to the purpose by the original author, the type of text and the intentions held for the translated version. We have already indicated that the pain and anger associated with colonisation is still being played out in Māori communities, and that when considering translation researchers must be mindful of the historical context of the interactions between government organisations and Māori. Translation scholar Anthony Pym (2014) recognises the long history and dynamic nature of translation, contending that translation is culturally and historically bound, and that the translator must also be located as a part of the translation of text. For Indigenous populations worldwide, the colonising people created written language and performed translations which in effect allowed them to progress colonisation (Jackson 1992). Here we add the notions of history, dynamism, and the translator as a person to our discussion of language as culturally bound.

The notion that the translator is integral to the translation is an interesting one to reflect on. Our project team already had a relationship with a Māori colleague who was fluent in te reo and would be a part of the interview team. However, he had no formal training as a translator and was not a native speaker having learned te reo Māori at university. We did not take those factors into consideration during our discussions about translating the research documents, but with hindsight they were important. He had other contributions to make:

Jacque: What do you think about the idea of translating the research materials?

Translator: I could do it, yes. But do you think we need to have them in te reo? I mean, most of the participants will speak English.

Jacque: True. But maybe we should do it anyway because some people might be more comfortable talking about cancer in te reo? It would act as a signal that it's OK.

Translator: Well, I usually translate the bits they don't understand anyway. I just do it as we go.

Wait, what? Now we start to have a discussion about 'code switching', which is when a bilingual speaker uses elements (not only words) from both languages in a single interaction (Nilep 2006). Our colleague was describing code switching as a standard part of his interview repertoire, and the rest of the team had been unaware. After a brief flurry of exclamations, the conversation continued.

Shemana: If we translate the documents, will that change how you interview?

Translator: It will. I don't know if it's a good idea because a lot of the medical jargon we use just won't translate, you know? I actually tried to take part in an online survey that was offered in te reo Māori and I couldn't follow half of it. They used words that I hadn't come across before. It was an awful experience, to be honest. I think that as long as the interviewer is able to offer translations of the bits the participant doesn't understand, we shouldn't do a full translation. I like being able to use the real-world situation of people being able to choose which language suits their kōrero.

Jacque: I'm hearing that your relationship with the person you're interviewing actually guides your translation?

Translator: Exactly. I wouldn't be effective without forming the relationship through whakawhanaungatanga (a process building relationships). I guess that's one reason I found the online survey so frustrating—it was impersonal.

This exchange highlighted the notion that the translator *as a person* was a vital part of the translation process, with his ability to understand and respond to the participants' language needs as they emerged. Our colleague's relationship with the participants enhanced his ability to respond to their need for code-switching, and his ability to code-switch in turn enhanced his relationship with the participants.

A political decision

The project under discussion here was conceived and largely carried out by non-Māori researchers. Most of the Māori involvement in the project was in the form of advice and guidance. As mentioned, te Tiriti is the document that establishes the terms of engagement between Māori and the Crown. It follows, therefore, that the Māori researchers advising the research team would view decisions regarding the use of te reo and strategies for inviting Māori to participate in the research as inherently political. Ensuring the honouring of te Tiriti obligations was a priority. This was highlighted through a series of conversations with members of the wider Māori advisory group who pointed out that any Māori who were considering taking part in the research “have the right to have the choice to have the research explained in their own reo”. This related not only to the Tiriti-based right to self-determination, but also to the understanding that te reo and health are viewed by Māori as taonga: treasures that are protected by te Tiriti. From some points of view, even if most of the Māori participants did not speak te reo fluently it was their right to have access to it within the research. Including te re Māori was seen as a gesture of respect as well as meeting the team’s obligations under te Tiriti.

However, the long standing impacts of colonisation means that many Māori are not confident speakers of te reo Māori, and in fact feel significant shame about their lack of knowledge (Ka’ai-Mahuta 2011). One of the key components of colonisation is to deny and erase the Indigenous language (Jackson 1992). For Māori, that erasure of te reo Māori started in 1867 with the imposition of English as the sole language used in state schools (Ka’ai-Mahuta 2011). The policy was rigorously enforced, including beating children for using te reo Māori at school, well into the mid-1900s. Consequently, te reo Māori became a language that was only used extensively in small Māori communities, with the attendant loss of fluent speakers who moved away from their homes of origin to seek work in the cities. Living with the shame and grief of the systematic removal of their Indigenous language has had a devastating impact on Māori identity, including removing access to traditional wisdom and the inability to feel in control of one’s destiny (Jackson 1992). Making the choice to translate the research materials into te reo Māori could act as a deterrent or even be perceived as intimidating or shaming for some potential participants (see Kidman 2018). The over-arching purpose of considering a translation within this project was to uphold the values within te Tiriti, to pay respect to te reo Māori and to provide an avenue for self-determination for Māori participants. Regardless of these intentions, colonisation means that some of our Māori participants may be made to feel shame and grief if they are spoken to in te reo Māori and provided with a Māori translation when they are not competent users of the language.

Voice and representation

The project needed to recruit a certain number of Māori participants in order to meet the criteria for successful data analysis, as well as wanting to make a difference to Māori health outcomes. However, we had to consider the implications of both not translating, because it would seemingly be a breach of our te Tiriti obligations, and also the implications of actually performing the translation as a somewhat mercenary means to entice reluctant participants to engage. A further issue we considered was whether providing a translation implied for Māori participants that the project itself was grounded in te ao Māori. The use of a European-based medical survey as the main data collection tool with subsequent semi-structured interviews located this project’s western bio-medical underpinnings. The researchers doing the everyday work of managing and analysing the data were non-Māori. As advisors we were able to add a relatively strong Māori view to the process, although this stopped short of ensuring that the ‘story’ of Māori, their strengths, risks, needs and preferred ways of being, were fully and fairly represented (Reid et al. 2017). Our concern was two-fold; for Māori participants to be able to feel that the research process would be respectful of them as Māori, and for the early research documents to accurately reflect what would happen to the data throughout the analysis and dissemination aspects of the project. Through our roles as advisors or minor players in this project, and our trust in our non-Indigenous colleagues, we were assured that the data and dissemination activities would be respectful. However, we needed to ensure that by translating we were not giving the impression that the analysis would be performed and interpreted in a way that reflected te ao Māori.

Our discussions about translation were consistently recognising that there were both benefits and potential harms to our participants no matter which language we chose, although it seemed that having a code-switching interviewer could mitigate the harmful effects that might arise from either translating or not translating. Looking further afield, such issues were not unique to Māori. Rather, issues relating to translation have also been expressed by a number of researchers internationally.

Internationally

One of our Indigenous researchers, Shemana, took our discussions further by contributing her experiences. She conducted her research in Sri Lanka and considered that the issues we were working through around translation were also relevant to other cultures.

Shemana's story

A few years ago, I embarked on my first research project to explore the ways in which people from Sri Lanka worked to address the disruption to their life narratives caused by the loss of loved ones as a result of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. My project involved interviewing five key informants in the rural fishing town of Hikkaduwa, who were affected by the tsunami. Given that my academic base was Aotearoa New Zealand, I had obtained ethical approval for the project from a human research ethics committee at the academic institution with which I was affiliated.

In particular, the ethics application recommended that I translate all my research material (aka participant information sheets and consent forms) into Sinhala—the 'native' language spoken by my participants, and also my first language. Despite Sinhala being my first language, however, direct translation of these documents was difficult. Writing them up in English was easier as there were pre-designed templates that I could follow and add to. I was not able to say the same when composing the Sinhala translation, as I had no template to aid my efforts. Therefore, I had to engage the help of my mother's work colleague (who lived in Sri Lanka). This individual had completed his tertiary education in Sinhala as well, whereas I had only considered Sinhala my first language up to the end of high school, and upon embarking on university education, I had switched to English. Nonetheless, we constructed Sinhala translations of my research material, and thus ticked the box on the ethics application.

On my first interaction with a participant, despite handing him my carefully constructed PIS, and offering to go through it page by page (as ethical research conventions dictated), he did not spare the document more than a passing glance and politely kept it aside. He also politely indicated that he did not want me to read the document out to him, but that he would prefer if I simply verbally told him what was in it, and what he should know. While I was confused and slightly unnerved about breaching ethical guidelines, I did as he requested. The other participants reacted in a similar manner to these conventions pertaining to the initial, introductory part of an interview.

Upon later reflection and further reading, I realised that first, when I verbally explained the purpose of the project and its aims to the participants, the verbal Sinhala that I used was quite different to the language in the actual documents. Something that I did not consciously realise until later, was the complexity around the Sinhala language. The verbal language is very informal and varies in dialect based on where the speaker is from. Whereas the written language is very formal and conveys a level of power, status and hierarchy, as only people of higher status (based on social standing and/or educational achievement) tend to use this version of the language. This is further complicated by the fact that many people from rural communities (like the one I worked in) do not often know how to read or write. The problem I faced was that many of the English words that I had used to appease the ethics committee could not be translated

directly into verbal Sinhalese (e.g. words like psychology, or monument). Thus, for the purpose of translation, they had to be translated into the formal, written Sinhalese. And so, it was not surprising that many of my participants did not even attempt to read those documents, or the ones who did attempt to read it often looked up at me with blank faces as they did not understand what the documents said exactly. Verbally explaining the research by using informal, verbal Sinhala, and even Singlish (a combination of English and Sinhala, or by pointing out/extensively explaining ideas, things or objects that I could not directly translate) was much more conducive.

Through her story, Shemana is alluding to three key messages: the intricate distinctions between written (formal) and spoken (informal) language and dialects, the occasionally problematic nature of often prescriptive mainstream research conventions, and a need to consider the complexities relating to translation and analysis of research material (Li 2011, Maclean 2007). It is important to note that the decision she came about how to manage the translations was consistent with the practice of verbal explanation in the language chosen by the participants that our Māori colleague employed.

Although we have not focused particularly on ethics committee approval in this discussion, the impact of the largely Western paradigm on Indigenous consent is undeniable (Tomaselli 2017). In addition to imposing the templates and ‘standardisation’ Shemana describes, the very act of signing a paper to indicate consent is problematic for peoples who have experienced the full force of colonialism. It is an issue of trust, and as researchers from institutions we are the colonial ‘other’, regardless of our own cultures of origin.

Returning then, to our discussion on translation, Spivak’s words resonate for us, when she talks about the “forced simplicity of plain English” that has imposed itself as the “norm” (Spivak 2012, 313). She also notes, as we did above, that direct translation loses the cultural embeddedness and the transmission of meaning that is afforded through Indigenous languages. In our framing of this issue for our project we discussed ‘te wairua o te reo Māori’ (the spiritual connectedness of our language), which manifests itself in the use of culturally specific metaphor to portray complex and culturally embedded information. We see considerable similarities between Spivak’s academic language as she reflects on translating Sanskrit and ours as we consider the use of te reo Māori in this English academic paper. Similarly, these arguments about the loss of meaning are being made by academics from other indigenous nations such as Africa (Tomaselli 2017), China (Li 2011) and Bolivia (Maclean 2007). As Shemana found, when Sinhalese is translated it loses a whole wealth of meaning in the process. As our translator found, when Māori is translated it can become such a different language that all meaning itself is lost. Clearly there is an international awareness of the complexities of the process of translation, the damage that can be done through the imposition of a colonisers’ language, and the ethical imperative that translation be considered through an Indigenous lens.

Discussion and conclusion: Making the decision

According to *Te Ara Tika* (Hudson et al. 2010), the research project we are discussing in this paper is characterised as “research involving Māori” (23) because the project was conceived and carried out according to Western perspectives but included Māori participants. This positioning of the research embodied te Tiriti o Waitangi as the underpinning framework for defining and operationalising the relationship between the Western researchers and research, and any potential Māori participants (Health Research Council of New Zealand 2010). This relationship became the field of interest for us as we considered the use of te reo Māori in the research documents. The key points in our discussion were about the absolute right of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) Māori hold under te Tiriti, the embeddedness of te reo as the Indigenous language of Aotearoa and a protected *taonga*, and the ongoing negative impact of colonisation on Māori. This latter included the systematic removal of te reo Māori from public life, and the subsequent grief and shame of Māori who are still unable to speak their own language (Ka’ai-Mahuta 2011). We conceptualised the enforced addition of translated materials as potentially retraumatising some participants as they would represent the losses associated with colonisation. This would almost certainly not be the case for all participants, but we considered it to be too risky since we did not know who the participants would be.

The Māori authors of this paper are all in varying stages of our own journey relating to te reo Māori, which includes our own experiences of the current effects of colonisation on us and our whānau (family). It is important to acknowledge that none of us felt able to step into the role of bilingual researcher for this project, whether because we literally cannot speak te reo Māori to the level our potential participants would need, or because we do not trust in our ability to make ourselves understood. The different ways of understanding fluency within the context of colonisation is a topic for another paper but is one that needs further exploration.

As a group of Indigenous researchers, we support the normalisation of te reo in academic spaces. However, this paper has presented an important opportunity to more fully understand the complexities around code-switching and the use of technical or academic language in translations (Nilep 2006, Pym 2014). Furthermore, there are important nuances relating to translating te reo involving how metaphor, kīwaha (idiomatic phrases) and culturally bound information is shared with another language with its own cultural embeddedness (Spivak 2012). We have a new appreciation of the theoretical and technical expertise of translators.

The research materials in our study were not translated into te reo Māori. Ultimately, we had three reasons for this. 1) The project itself was not based on te ao Māori, and we believed that translations would inaccurately represent the western process that was embedded in the research; 2) the process of verbal translations that were based on the needs of the participants at the time of the data collection had worked previously for our translator in the field; and 3) the research materials contained medical and institutional based language (such as symptom tracking and clinic appointments) that would not readily translate into te reo Māori. Ultimately, we wanted to avoid using translated documents as a means to make Māori participants feel comfortable in a non-Māori space. In this decision we were cognisant that “kaupapa Māori knowledge is not to be confused with Pākehā knowledge ... that has been translated into Māori” (Tuakana Nepe, cited in Smith and Reid 2000, 3). Despite wanting to see te reo used in research settings, we believed that in this situation it was important to preserve the integrity of te reo Māori as a portal into the unique space of te ao Māori.

The process of decision-making and writing this paper to explain our process has resulted in learnings that could be applied in other research settings, particularly where non-Indigenous researchers are working with Indigenous populations and participants. Most importantly, it is uncomfortably necessary to understand what the desired outcome of translation is. This involves a candid examination of the role Indigenous participants have in the research. Are they required in order to meet external requirements of, for example, ethics committees or government funders? Is their data important to add credibility and relevance to the findings? Is the translation simply a means of attracting participants who would otherwise not engage? If this is the case, how can the researchers adapt the project so they are respectful of the data, its analysis and the need for culturally acceptable dissemination activities? We propose that the involvement of an oral translator who is culturally aligned with the Indigenous population and proficient at code-switching is likely to mitigate these issues.

Understanding the context of the Indigenous participants is the precursor to being able to treat their data with respect and integrity. What are the processes the team will use to ensure that such data is understood from within its own context? What is the ongoing impact of colonisation on the Indigenous participants and how can the researchers avoid traumatising them further? This may mean involving and resourcing Indigenous researchers or advisory groups.

Finally, we would urge any research team who conclude that translating their materials is a necessity to engage a qualified and experienced translator to undertake the task.

Glossary

Iwi: tribe

Kaumātua: elders

Kaupapa Māori: Māori ideology

Kīwaha: idioms

Kōrero: speak, talk

Pūrākau: stories

Taonga: treasured item, concept or action

Te ao Māori: the Māori world

Te reo Māori: Māori language

Te Tiriti o Waitangi: founding treaty between Māori and the English Crown

Tino rangatiratanga: self-determination, sovereignty, right to exercise authority

Wairua: spirit, soul, spirit of a person

Whakapapa: genealogy

Whakataukī: proverbs

Whakawhanaungatanga: a process of introduction where family, area or experience-based connections are sought

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