

Consumers guide to working with Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander

# Interpreters and Translators



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# Who is QIIS?

## The Queensland Indigenous Interpreting Service (QIIS) is an

Indigenous-led, Queensland-based interpreting and translation peak body.

QIIS supports the State Government in its Language Services obligations, which enshrines the right for Indigenous people to understand and be understood, and support all those who seek to engage appropriately.

QIIS is established for and by Queensland Indigenous practitioners, and is backed by Aboriginal Interpreting WA (AIWA) — a strong, community-controlled Indigenous organisation in its 25th year. Queensland practitioners prepare to take full operations, ensuring Queensland interpreters determine their own governance, operational systems and workforce pathways.

- Culturally governed, professional and ethical interpreting and translating services across Aboriginal, Torres Strait and Indigenous sign languages. Spoken indigenous languages and embedded cultural indigenous sign languages interpreting and translating.
- Support for government agencies to meet their engagement obligations.
- Culturally safe, protocol-aligned communication across justice, health, community and government sectors.
- Recruitment, induction, mentoring and Diploma of Interpreting pathways.
- A single point of contact and peak body for Indigenous language interpreting and translating in Queensland.
- 24/7 service delivery and efficient booking system

# Queensland Indigenous Languages

## Languages of Queensland

Queensland is home to over 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across Cape York, Torres Strait, Gulf Country, Central Queensland and South-East Queensland. Languages include Meriam Mir, Kala Lagaw Ya, Yumplatok, Guugu Yimithirr, Wik-Mungkan, Yidinji, Yuggera, Turrbal, Jagera, Butchulla and many more. Many community members speak multiple languages and may use English as a second, third or fourth language. Interpreters are essential for safe and equitable communication.

## Cultural Sign Language

Cultural Sign Language is used every day by Deaf and hearing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is a full language with its own grammar, authority and cultural meaning. It does not come from Auslan - it comes from culture, country and community.

QIIS works with national leader Jody Barney to build safe pathways for Cultural Sign Language Interpreters in Queensland.

**QIIS interpreter and translator base covers the entire State of Queensland including the Torres Strait Islands.**

**QIIS ensures services are delivered according AUSIT code of ethics which**

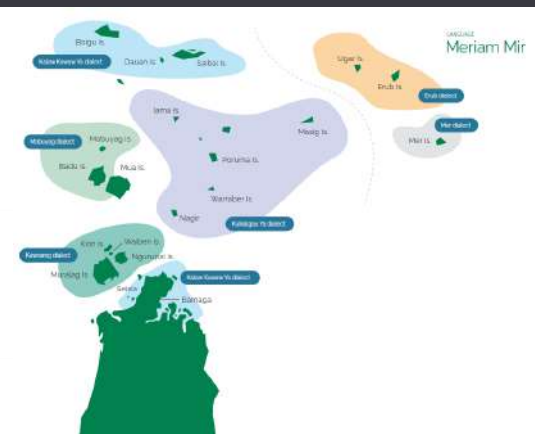


**requires practitioners to interpret accurately, omitting or adding nothing maintain strict confidentiality maintain impartiality and objectivity act professionally at all times.**

**Our practitioners are trained to interpret western concepts and technical words in the legal and health fields, governance and more.**

**Practitioners must often coin new phrases or borrow words from both English and other Indigenous languages to ensure all parties understand one another.**

**Practitioners also provide cross-cultural information ensuring everyone is aware of the cultural basis of any exchange.**



Meriam Mir Cape York Wik Mungkan  
Jirrbal Community Creoles  
Cultural Kalau Lagau Ya  
Sign Language Kuuk Thaayorre  
Wakka Wakka Djabugay  
Yumplatok

## QIIS Translation Services

**Accurate • Ethical • Culturally Governed • Professionally Assured**

QIIS provides professional translation services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across Queensland, including written documents, audio recordings, government communications, websites, apps, posters, community initiatives, and sensitive materials such as prison phone calls, court recordings, child safety interviews and health information.

Translation requires specialist expertise and a collaborative process to ensure accuracy, cultural safety and professional integrity. QIIS follows strict quality-assurance procedures consistent with Indigenous interpreting ethics and international translation standards.

# Our Translation Process

## 1. QIIS identifies the language(s) or dialect(s)

A QIIS linguistic expert confirms the most accurate language or dialect for the recording or document.

## 2. QIIS appoints a culturally and linguistically appropriate translation team

A typical translation team includes:

- Two QIIS-registered interpreters for verification
- A cultural consultant or support person
- A QIIS coordinator overseeing quality and process integrity

## 3. Triageing the content (for prison calls or long audio)

Where triage is required:

- A Client representative attends onsite or remotely
- A QIIS interpreter may gist or explain the audio
- QIIS and the Client select sections requiring full translation
- A time-coded document is created
- Triage is billed at standard interpreting rates

4. **Acceptance of Quote** Translation only begins after formal acceptance by the Client.

## 5. Translation Work

Interpreters work orally, long-hand or typed depending on language and cultural protocols.



## 6. Collaborative Cross-Checking

Interpreters:

- check each other's meaning transfer
- agree on phrasing
- correct issues
- ensure cultural alignment and accuracy

If wording cannot be agreed:

- Audible but unclear → translator footnote
- Inaudible → [Inaudible]

## 7. Use of Third Linguistic Expert

A third interpreter may be engaged if required.

## 8. Proofreading & Quality Assurance

A final QIIS review is completed before delivery.

## 9. Interpreter Availability

If a team member becomes unavailable for cultural, ethical or emotional reasons, QIIS will appoint a suitable replacement.

## 10. Client Follow-Up Questions

Additional interpreter time may be required for explanation after delivery.

# Types of Translations QIIS Provides

## 1. Prison Phone Calls & Justice Materials

- prison calls
- police interviews
- court transcripts
- parole/probation communications

## 2. Government Documents & Public Information

- forms, letters, policy, health and emergency materials

## 3. Websites, Apps & Digital Platforms

- websites, portals, SMS campaigns, app content, online forms

## 4. Posters, Flyers, Initiatives & Promotions

- health, safety, community events and service navigation resources

## 5. Audio, Radio, Animation & Multimedia

- voice recordings, radio announcements, animations, video scripts, community messages

## Ethical & Cultural Governance

### QIIS translations follow:

- strict confidentiality
- impartiality
- cultural authority and kinship correctness
- Indigenous interpreting ethics
- community linguistic knowledge
- accuracy and completeness
- accountability and professionalism

Each translation reflects cultural meaning, relationships and intent—not just the words.



# Miscommunication

A common type of miscommunication when talking with INDIGENOUS people is **gratuitous concurrence**. This is the tendency of Indigenous clients to agree with a questioner, regardless of whether or not he or she actually agrees with, or even understands the question. It is a very common feature of Indigenous conversations throughout Australia, and is customarily used to indicate a readiness for cooperative interaction, or resignation to the futility of a situation.

Gratuitous concurrence is the source of considerable misunderstanding and miscommunication in courtrooms where the emphasis is on establishing fact.

In Indigenous societies, facts do not exist independently of relationships. Info relationship between the participants in that conversation.

Gratuitous concurrence is particularly common where a questioner, especially a non-Indigenous questioner, is in a position of authority and when a questioner asks a series of 'yes/no' questions. There are no easy remedies for this problem, but recognising it when it occurs goes some way towards reducing the disadvantage.

Other types of miscommunication occur because non-Indigenous people can be impatient and do not allow Indigenous clients adequate time to respond to questions or statements. Generally speaking, longer periods of silence than are normally tolerated in general communications are essential in order to obtain accurate information from an Indigenous client.

**The use of professional registered Indigenous interpreters is the most effective way to ensure that Indigenous clients understand what is being said, are able to fully express themselves and miscommunication, because of cultural differences is substantially reduced.**

# Benefits

## of working with interpreters

- 1 . Recognition and respect - shows recognition and respect for the language/s of the community, and by extension shows respect for local identity and culture.
- 2 . Learning new ideas - allows participants to absorb new information in their first language. Even participants with strong English will benefit from hearing the message twice; once in English and once in their first language. Hearing the message in two languages will allow participants to confirm that they correctly understood the English message.
- 3 . Specialised language - just because a participant has good conversational English, does not necessarily mean they have sufficient proficiency or confidence to discuss complex and technical topics such as governance, housing, health and legal issues. It is easy to over-estimate the general level of English of a group based on the input of a few vocal participants or based on introductory conversations.
- 4 . Robust and nuanced dialogue - participants can engage in much more robust and nuanced discussion if they are able to express themselves in their first language. It is highly likely a higher level of discussion and engagement will be experienced if discussions occur in participants' first language.
- 5 . Equal access - allows all participants, including those who are not confident English speakers to receive information and present their views. By keeping the discussions in English, some participants are prevented from fully engaging. Using an interpreter keeps the meeting fair and accessible to everyone. Occasionally, it is possible that some individual participants with strong English may not want discussions to be interpreted or may want the discussions to occur in English, as this provides greater control over the meeting.
- 6 . Facilitator's understanding - allows the facilitator to understand comments and discussions that occur in Indigenous languages

# Considerations

## when deciding to engage an interpreter



Deciding how well a person speaks English (assessing English proficiency) is a complex task ideally carried out by a trained linguist. Untrained assessors significantly underestimate the amount of miscommunication that occurs during a conversation with someone who does not speak English as their first language.

Those individuals who speak English as a second language and have limited education in English are likely to need an interpreter. This is particularly true when faced with specialised language and unfamiliar situations like hospitals, medical appointments, a courtroom and police stations.

There are many things that reduce the ability of a non-native speaker of English to communicate effectively in English:

- Stress
- Unfamiliarity with the situation or uncertainty about what is expected
- An imbalance in power/knowledge between the parties
- Background noise
- A conversation involving more than two people, especially if there is overlapping speech or hearing challenges
- An inability to see the speaker's face
- People speaking too quickly
- The use of technical terms, figurative language, abstract nouns and complicated sentences.

It may be very obvious that an interpreter is required in some cases and not so obvious in others.

To make the decision on whether to call in an interpreter or not, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my client/patient understand me and are they fully expressing themselves in this situation?
- If I fell ill in a non-English speaking country and had to rely on my client to interpret any diagnosis and instructions into English for me, would I be happy to proceed?

If you feel any hesitation about relying on your client to adequately communicate to you what is going on, your client shouldn't be expected to proceed without the assistance of an interpreter.



If you decide that your client/patient does not need the assistance of an interpreter, you must be satisfied they understand the full range of language (including speed, technical terms, complicated concepts and treatment options) that they encounter during the interaction.

## Aboriginal English and Creole

Assessing English proficiency of Aboriginal clients is further complicated because of the use of Aboriginal English or Creole. A client may use English words, but the meaning of those words differs significantly from the Standard English meaning. The result is a mistaken assumption that the client can communicate proficiently in Standard English.

### Examples of differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English meanings:

kill	to hurt physically (hit, kick, punch etc.)
don't have to	must not
deadly	really good, awesome
can't	will not (eg 'we can't cure you' = 'we won't cure you')

# Biographical data



Most Indigenous people who speak English as a second language have had repeated experience providing biographical data to service providers (where do you live, what's your date of birth, are you employed, etc).

Your client/patient's ability to provide biographical data should not be relied upon as the basis for failing to call in an interpreter. Many people can adequately answer simple questions about their life. This does not mean they have sufficient English to describe events, symptoms, understand legal or medical procedures or fully understand or discuss options.

Client/patients should be asked "*what language do you speak most at home*", not "*do you speak English?*" Most people will quite truthfully answer "yes" because they do speak some English. To paint an accurate picture of someone's abilities in English, move the conversation into topics and conversational styles that the client does not use on a regular basis.

# Modifying speech

When it seems obvious that someone does not understand what we're saying, we often re-frame unanswered open questions (e.g. *Can you tell me how you feel?*) as either/or questions or even closed yes/no questions (e.g. *Have you got a headache?*). When this happens, the client may become reliant on our prompts, suggestions, tone of voice and other cues to enable the conversation to proceed. In other words, the client's ability to communicate is limited to the questions we ask. We do not provide them with the option of fully explaining their own symptoms, situations or opinions. Relying on yes/no questions is not a good basis for deciding whether an interpreter is required.

# How to talk to clients about the need for an interpreter



It is important to raise the topic of working with an interpreter in a sensitive manner. There may be many reasons for disliking interpreters:

- the client may not know what an interpreter does
- the client may have had a negative experience with an interpreter in the past
- the client may not want other people knowing about their business
- the client may think they have to pay for an interpreter
- the client may feel shame or anger because it indicates their English isn't 'good enough'

Remember that an interpreter is not there just for the client. The interpreter is there for all parties - to help everyone communicate with each other.

A suggested way to discuss the need for an interpreter is -

*Before we start talking, I want to ask you about what language we should use today. Maybe we can talk in English, or maybe it's better if we talk in your language. I don't speak your language, so if we think it's better to talk in your language I will ask an interpreter to help me.*

Before you directly ask your client what they think about having an interpreter present, you should explain the interpreter's role so that your client can make an informed decision.

*An interpreter is someone who speaks your language and speaks English and has had training to help them understand the difficult words that you will hear today. The interpreter will put everything I say into your language and everything you say into English. The interpreter must follow the rules. They can't take sides. They must keep the message the same — they can't add anything or leave anything out. The interpreter must keep everything we talk about secret.*

# Steps

## When deciding to engage an interpreter

### Step 1 – Ask your client about working with an interpreter

- Raise the issue of working with an interpreter and explain the interpreter's role. Refer to 'How to decide if you should work with an interpreter' in the previous section.
- Ask your client/patient, using an open question (avoid re-framing as a yes/no question if you do not get a response). *What do you think about asking an interpreter to help us? or What do you want to do?*
- If your client/patient indicates they would like an interpreter, stop the interview and arrange for an interpreter to be present.
- If your client/patient has difficulty answering this question, stop the interview and arrange for an interpreter to be present.
- If your client/patient indicates they do not want an interpreter, proceed to step 2.

### Step 2 – Assess speaking ability (Ask questions that require a narrative response)

- Get your client/patient to speak to you in narrative (story) form by asking open-ended background questions (e.g. *Tell me about*

*another time you had to come to the hospital/clinic) or questions related to the topic at hand (e.g. *Tell me about the first time you felt this pain.**

- Avoid questions that can be answered with one or two words (e.g. *How long have you been feeling sick?*). Include at least one question that seeks the client/patient's thoughts or opinions (e.g. *What do you think is making you feel sick? Why do you think that?*).
- If your client/patient does not respond with anything more than a few words to the first few questions, make several further attempts at eliciting a longer response.
- If unsuccessful, then it is unlikely that your client/patient can express him/herself adequately or confidently in English. Stop the interview and arrange for an interpreter to be present.
- If your client/patient gives satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory responses, proceed to step 3.



### **Step 3 – Assess comprehension and speaking relevant to the medical/hospital context**

- Write down 2 sets of 2 medium length sentences, using the style and some of the terms that your client/patient will encounter in the consultation or treatment. Do not simplify your language or adapt it significantly from what your client/patient will encounter in the consultation or treatment.
- Read each set to your client/patient and ask them to explain back to you what you just said. Avoid prompting your client/patient or supplying answers. Write down their responses.

#### **Present the task to your client/patient like this:**

*I need to tell you something important now, and then I will ask you to tell that story back to me. This way I can check that we understand each other. Are you ready?*

#### **Example 1**

*Today we need to decide what treatment we will give you. First I'm going to tell you about two different treatments. You can ask*

*me questions and then I will tell you what will happen if you decide to have one of those treatments.*

*Okay, now tell me back what I just said to you?*

#### **Example 2**

*When we go into the radiotherapy room, you will be lying on the table, which we move around so that it's in the right position. I will be standing by the x-ray machine, behind a glass screen. If you need to get my attention, raise your hand.*

*Can you tell me back what I just said to you?*

#### **Example 3**

*At your appointment today the physiotherapist and I will both talk about you to the specialist. The specialist will listen to us, and then he will make a decision about your treatment when you go home.*

*Can you tell me back what I said to you?*

### **Step 4 – Assess communication**

Assess the client/patient's response, and any other communication you have already had with them.

	<b>Likely to need an interpreter</b>	<b>Less likely to need an interpreter</b>
Articulating back	The person has difficulty articulating back what you said to them.	The person is able to articulate meaningfully most of what you said to them, using their own words.
Short or long answers	The person only speaks in short sentences (4-5 words or less) or mainly gives one-word answers.	The person speaks in full sentences of 6-7 words or more, and elaborates answers to questions.
Agrees or disagrees	The person consistently agrees with your questions or propositions you put to them.	The person is easily able to disagree and articulate a different point of view.
Inappropriate responses	The person frequently responds inappropriately to your comments or questions (e.g. responding with 'yes' to 'what' or 'where' questions).	The person consistently responds meaningfully and appropriately to questions and comments.
Unsure of meaning	You are sometimes unsure as to what exactly your client/patient is telling you even when the words and grammar they use are clear to you.	You can process the person's speech clearly and understand what it is they are telling you.
Contradictions	The person appears to contradict themselves and is unaware of the apparent contradictions.	The person does not contradict themselves, or if they do, they are aware of and can address the contradiction.
Uses new vocabulary	The person does not add significant amounts of new vocabulary to the conversation. They rely on using the words or phrases that you have previously said to them.	The person frequently adds new vocabulary to the conversation.
Good grammar	The person does not use correct grammar, e.g. mixes up pronouns ('he' instead of 'she'), uses past tense incorrectly ('he look at me').	The person uses English grammatically.
Repeating and simplifying	You find yourself frequently needing to restate and simplify your sentences.	You can talk easily in a normal manner.

# Guidelines

## for working with interpreters



### 1. Briefing

Interpreters must be briefed on the topic prior to a meeting. They must be well prepared with a strong understanding of all content.

### 2. Introduction and time allowance

It is crucial the interpreter be introduced at the beginning of the meeting and given adequate time to interpret what is said.

### 3. Use of professional terminology

It is best express yourself using plain English. If you need to use professional terminology or jargon, ensure both the interpreter and the client/s understand it.

### 4. Use of short statements

Use short statements so the interpreter can remember and interpret accurately.

### 5. Seating arrangements

(one on one) If possible, the best arrangement is triangular to ensure communication is directed towards the client/s.

### 6. Facial expression

Speak directly to the client/s so he/she can see your facial expression, and you can see his/hers.

### 7. Speak directly to your client

Always say "you" to the client and use first person ("I", "me") to refer to yourself. The interpreter will interpret for you and the client in the first person.

### 8. Private opinion

Never ask an Interpreter for his private opinion of the client. The interpreter must be impartial in all situations.

### 9. World view / Language differences

Interpreters cannot always translate word for word. Sometimes the interpreter will communicate a concept with fewer words and sometimes with more.

### 10. Use of unqualified people, relatives or children

Do not use unqualified people, relatives or children as interpreters. Qualified interpreters ensure communication between you and your client is accurate and impartial.

# Booking an interpreter



Bookings should be made as early as possible. At least **2 days notice** is required. Finding an appropriate interpreter is time consuming and travel to and from remote locations is not always easy or fast.

## Information required before an interpreter can be assigned:

1. name of the organisation/ section requesting the service
2. name of the English speaker requiring the interpreter
3. name, skin name, age and gender of the Aboriginal person/ persons requiring an interpreter
4. Aboriginal language to be interpreted
5. which community the Aboriginal client comes from
6. location, date and time the service is required
7. broad area of the assignment (health, police, courts, etc.) and

specific topic of the assignment (murder trial, serious disease diagnosis, etc)

8. names of all participants in the assignment

Based on this information, a culturally-appropriate interpreter can be located and prepared for an assignment, with cultural clashes and conflicts of interest avoided.

## Pre-assignment meeting

This essential meeting, either in person or by phone, provides a time and place for briefing an interpreter on the details of an assignment - the topic, any expected jargon or technical terms that may be encountered, the names of the parties and all other aspects of the appointment/meeting.

## Travel and accommodation

AIWA arranges all interpreter travel and accommodation. Clients will be invoiced for these costs on completion of an assignment. Costs (at ATO approved rates) may include:

- Airfares
- Taxi fares
- Accommodation
- Travel-time allowance
- Mileage allowance
- Travel allowance (including meals and incidentals)

# frequently asked Questions

## ***One of the group members is an interpreter - can't they do the interpreting?***

- The interpreter's role is to accurately and impartially change the message from one language to another. It is not ideal to have one person wear 'two hats'.
- Being impartial is inconsistent with being a participant and presenting opinions. If a person is both an interpreter and participant, it can be difficult to know when they are accurately interpreting and when they are presenting their views or opinions.
- If a person is a participant, they should be able to give their full attention to contributing to the discussion. If they are an interpreter, they need to give their full attention to interpreting accurately.
- A professional registered interpreter has clear duties and ethical guidelines to follow. Any unsatisfactory job performance can be addressed through the AIS. In the case of a community volunteer or person who is both participating and interpreting, there are no mechanisms to

ensure they stick to their role or to address unsatisfactory interpreting.

## ***The "Community/client" says they don't want an interpreter — what should I do?***

- Be careful about how you raise the issue of working with an interpreter. You are not suggesting participants' English is not good enough. Emphasise that it is you who needs an interpreter, not them.
- Explain the role of an interpreter —to interpret accurately and remain impartial (refer to page 2).
- Explain the benefits of using an interpreter (refer to page 1).
- Think about who you are asking and check that it is representative of all people at the meeting or all people you want to engage.
- If some people in the group are reluctant to engage the interpreter, but an interpreter has been booked, let the interpreter know, as they may need to explain their role to those people before the meeting.



***What happens when there are questions asked in English?***

Questions in English should be interpreted for the rest of the group into the Aboriginal language.

***Can I ask the interpreter to remain quiet until someone says they don't understand something?***

- This option is not best practice and is unlikely to encourage community engagement.
- It is unlikely that someone will tell you when they do not understand something. They are more likely to sit quietly and tune out.
- It is difficult to assess which part of the discussion was not understood, and how far back in the discussion the interpreter would need to go. It is then difficult to interpret accurately

***What if I don't have enough time for the interpreter to interpret everything?***

If you have invested the time and money to get the interpreter to the meeting, you need to make time for the interpreting to happen properly. Your aim is community engagement; ideas will be discussed more deeply and honestly in the language of the community.





## The story of the QIIS logo

### **Five Dots - The Torres Strait Islands**

The five dots in the design represent the five island clusters of the Torres Strait. They sit proudly in the logo to acknowledge the depth, diversity, and significance of Torres Strait Islander languages, cultures, and communication traditions within Queensland.

### **Turquoise Lines - The Sea and the Reach of Our Work**

The turquoise lines symbolise the sea - the waters that hold the islands, connect communities, and carry stories. They also stretch across the width and breadth of Queensland, representing the vast geographic reach of QIIS. Flowing westward, the lines reflect the long-standing relationship and mentorship between Queensland and AIWA in Western Australia - a recognition of shared responsibility and Indigenous solidarity.

### **The Trumpet Shell - Voice, Calling, Communication**

The shell placed within the dash of the Q reflects the power of voice and traditional methods of calling people together. Across island communities, the shell is a symbol of communication, of sending messages, gathering people, and ensuring everyone can hear and be heard.

### **The Weaving Mat - Women Gathering, Sharing, Understanding**

At the centre of the Q is a woven mat. Woven mats represent a place where women come

together to sit, talk, listen, share knowledge, solve problems, and pass culture to the next generations. It reflects the heart of interpreting - coming together to make meaning clear, safe, and culturally grounded.

### **The Flame - The Firestick and the Light From the West**

Above the second "I" sits the flame: a firestick, lit from the west. Firesticks across the continent have long been tools of signalling, communicating, and protecting people and Country. In the logo, the flame also honours the fire of knowledge passed from AIWA to QIIS - a fire tended carefully ensuring Queensland practitioners stand in their own authority.

### **The Message Sticks - The Two I's**

The two "I" letters in QIIS also represent message sticks. Message sticks are one of the oldest and strongest forms of communication across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. Here they represent accuracy, trust, integrity and the responsibility of interpreters to carry messages faithfully between languages, places, and people.

### **Ochre - The Earth**

The ochre colour grounding the design represents the earth - Country itself. It speaks to our identity, our belonging, our responsibility to language and culture, and the knowledge systems that guide every interpreter and translator who works through QIIS.