

Word by Word: Connecting Communities Through Translation

10 Years of the National
Translation Committee

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National Translation Committee

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Foreword

Translation has traditionally been a laborious process, heavily reliant on the translator's language capability, general knowledge, cultural understanding and research skills. Today, the translation landscape has been dramatically transformed with computer-assisted translation tools, machine translation engines and AI. These innovations have enhanced efficiency and accuracy, as well as revolutionised the very practice of translation, opening new frontiers for cross-lingual communication.

Yet, even as technology transforms the field of translation, the human element remains irreplaceable. The integration of technology and the translation process is not about displacement but augmentation. Recognising this, the National Translation Committee (NTC) developed SG Translate, a machine translation engine to better support localised translations. SG Translate was put to good use during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring health advisories reached all communities and enabling us to weather the crisis together.

We should expect the role of translation and the tools to continue evolving. Large Language Models and AI tools like ChatGPT will impact industries and the nature of work globally. Within Singapore, building on the foundations laid in the past decade, we have launched Smart Nation 2.0. We should aim to keep pace and harness technologies to continuously improve citizens' lives and serve our multilingual society effectively. I encourage the NTC and the local translation community to constantly reimagine our boundaries, build new bridges and explore new territories with agility and a sense of adventure.

Congratulations to the NTC on its 10th Anniversary. I wish the NTC many more years of translation excellence, as we work together to build a connected and inclusive Singapore.



Josephine Teo
Minister for Digital Development and Information &
Second Minister for Home Affairs

Message

In a multiracial and multilingual society like Singapore, translation is more than just a conversion of words. It is about connecting communities, fostering mutual understanding and deepening cultural appreciation as we collectively preserve multilingualism as part of our Singaporean identity. Since its establishment in 2014, the National Translation Committee (NTC) has been working on raising the translation standards of our four official languages to enhance the effectiveness and quality of our public communications.

As we mark our 10th Anniversary in 2024, the NTC has broadened its impact by engaging communities across the public, private and people sectors. Our initiatives — such as the Citizen Translators Project, Community-in-Translation Events Grant, Translation Talent Development Scheme, and Information Service (Translation) Scholarship — aim to nurture local translation talent and weave translation into our daily interactions and information access. Our SG Translate machine translation engine is another step towards leveraging technology to meet Singapore's unique linguistic needs.

Looking ahead, the NTC will focus on three key strategies: embracing technology to enhance translation quality, grooming a pipeline of homegrown talent and deepening community engagement, especially among our youth. By working with our partners to foster a dynamic translation ecosystem, we aim to strengthen bilingualism and enrich Singapore's linguistic and cultural landscape for many decades to come.

This commemorative book celebrates our partners' contributions, our achievements and invites more to join us in shaping the future of translation in Singapore. Happy 10th Anniversary to the NTC and everyone who has contributed to its efforts in one way or another!



Tan Kiat How

Chairperson of the National Translation Committee
Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information
& National Development

Many Languages, One Voice

Singapore has long been home to diverse people and languages, giving rise to the need for translation. Since becoming a nation, translation has become even more vital to bring its communities together, while nurturing a multicultural identity that stands out globally.

“One kopi o kosong!”

From ordering a cup of coffee to news reporting, a variety of languages are used in everyday Singapore. It is also common for people to switch between the official languages of English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil – or even mix them – in conversations with others. Such versatility is in our DNA.

This can be traced back to over 700 years ago when the island was a thriving port city that attracted people from the region and beyond. After the British developed Singapore into a free port in the 19th century, even more merchants, traders and labourers arrived from different places. They brought with them their diverse cultures and languages, giving rise to a multicultural, multilingual society.

Such multilingualism became a defining feature of Singapore as it marched towards independence from the 1950s. The first Legislative Assembly, led by Chief Minister David Marshall, held its debates in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil as they represented the four main ethnic groups. These languages were eventually enshrined in the Constitution.

After Singapore became independent in 1965, the Government also adopted a bilingual policy, so that its citizens could connect with the world while staying rooted to their heritage. English became the language of administration, instruction and commerce, while the Mother Tongue Languages anchored the people to their ethnic identities.

“To each what he originally had — his culture, his language, a link with his past, his heritage. And to each something added, so that they can meet and talk and understand, laugh at the same things, be pained and disturbed by the same things, and eventually integrate into one society.”

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister, laying out his vision for a bilingual Singapore in 1966.



Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
Photo Courtesy of National Archives Singapore

Lee Seng Giap oversaw the Government's translation services from 1969 to 1980.

Early Government Translation Services

With a multilingual society comes the need for translations so that language does not become a barrier to information access. This is especially true for translations between the administrative English language and Mother Tongue Languages, to ensure that vital information from the Government is conveyed effectively to the public.

The task of overseeing the translations of government messages was first undertaken by the Ministry of Culture led by then head of translation services, Lee Seng Giap.

“With the support of the National Translation Committee (NTC), comprising members from the public, private and people sectors, we will uphold good translation standards in government communications, promote best practices and groom good translators through scholarships and training courses.”

—
Then Minister for Communications and Information, Associate Professor Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, during an addendum to the President's Address in 2014

Almost three decades later, the Government recognised the pressing need to ensure quality and consistency of translation across the public service. On 1 March 2014, the then Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) formed the National Translation Committee (NTC) to enhance whole-of-government translation capabilities, engage the community who care deeply about translation and demonstrate the Government's commitment to communicate effectively with all Singaporeans — including those who are not proficient in English.

Today, this function is undertaken by the Translation Department under the Ministry of Digital Development and Information.

Raising Standards with the Community

The NTC was originally led by then Minister of State (MOS) for Communications and Information Sim Ann, who was joined by members from the media, academia, translation industry and government representatives. Together, the committee endeavoured to raise translation standards in the Government so as to:

1. Preserve cultural heritage and promote a diversity which is unique to Singapore.
2. Break down barriers between communities through understanding cultural nuances and perspectives.
3. Ensure accessible government information, including for those who are not proficient in English or prefer to consume content in their Mother Tongue Language.
4. Prevent misinformation by giving all communities access to accurate official information.
5. Encourage active citizenship. Those who can access information in their preferred language are more likely to stay interested in national issues, participate in discussions and give feedback on government initiatives.



The NTC Logo

Two 'L's representing different languages come together in a square formation to symbolise the collaboration among the public, private and people sectors. The red and green are of the corporate colours of the then Ministry of Communications and Information.



Besides raising translation standards, the NTC has brought communities closer too.

“In 2013 to 2014, a series of incidents had put the spotlight on mistranslations. Beyond the embarrassment caused by the actual errors, incidents like these raised questions of whether Government was paying enough attention to the needs of Singaporeans who could not read or understand much English.

This is where the NTC comes in. I was heartened that the Chinese, Malay and Tamil language translation experts who joined the NTC gave many constructive suggestions on how to make translation-related work processes more rigorous.

With support from industry professionals and a dedicated Secretariat, the NTC was one of the most productive committees I have had the honour of chairing.”



Sim Ann
Founding NTC Chairperson (2014–2015, 2018–2021)
Senior Minister of State (SMS) for Foreign Affairs &
National Development

“While English will continue to be our main language of administration, instruction, and commerce, our Mother Tongue Languages hold the key to a deeper understanding of ourselves, our heritage, and our identity.

Multilingualism allows Singaporeans to connect with people across countries and cultures, while having a sense of confidence of who we are and our place in a globalised world. It is a core part of Singapore’s societal DNA. Having competent translation capabilities will remain essential to a multilingual society like Singapore.”



Chee Hong Tat
NTC Chairperson (2015–2018)
Minister for Transport & Second Minister for Finance

What's a Good Translation? Ask the RP!

The NTC is supported by a Resource Panel (RP) for each of the national vernacular languages. They provide expert advice on specific translation issues, support the implementation of initiatives and help standardise the translation of terms or advise on their appropriateness.



“Should accuracy be the utmost requirement when we do public translations? In most cases, it is. But not all the time. If we translate word-for-word to avoid having a gap in the text, the translated text becomes very strange and rigid, unlike natural Chinese expressions. Discerning people will then know at first glance that this is a literal translation.”

—

Peter Ong

Associate Editor of *Lianhe Zaobao* and
Head of the NTC Chinese Resource Panel



As countries are becoming more multilingual, what does it mean when Singapore moves against this tide?



“The Malay Resource Panel consists of members from different ages, backgrounds and experiences, so our experiences with English and Malay vary. When we translate, we each bring to the table what is reflective of our background. We take all views into consideration, discuss and then to come to an agreement as to what would be the suitable translation.”

—
Mohd Mukhlis Abu Bakar
Associate Professor and Head of the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group at the National Institute of Education and Head of the NTC Malay Resource Panel

“There are two perspectives on language: one group of people are purists who advocate for preserving the language in its traditional form, while another group believes that language should be fluid to adapt to changing times. Balancing these views is crucial to effectively communicate with a broad audience without losing the essence of the language. It is essential for the Government, media and educational institutions to reach a consensus to minimise confusion and ensure clarity for the receiver.”

—
Santhi Sellappan
Centre Director of Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre and Head of the NTC Tamil Resource Panel



Find out how we can help our young embrace bilingualism beyond the classrooms.



Find out why it is important to learn more than one language.

In Translation: The NTC Journey

2014

Inauguration of the National Translation Committee (NTC) on 1 March

“We needed to rally the professional community of translators. Their support and assistance meant so much to me and my then MCI colleagues. I knew that whatever we wanted to do for translation could succeed only with the professionals’ backing.”

— Senior Minister of State (SMS) for Foreign Affairs & National Development Sim Ann on her time as founding NTC Chairperson.

2015

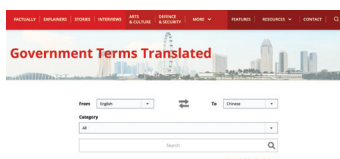
Launched the Information Service (Translation) Scholarship, the first government scholarship to groom translation talents in the public service.



Former Minister of Communications and Information Dr Yaacob Ibrahim (centre) and then NTC Chairperson Sim Ann (second from left) with the first batch of translation scholars (fourth and fifth from right).

Introduced the Whole-of-Government Period Contract and Framework Agreement for Translation Services, to help the public service procure and produce quality translations.

Launched the Government Terms Translated Database, a repository of standardised translations, including the names of ministries, government initiatives and landmarks, in the four official languages.



2016

Then SMS Chee Hong Tat takes over chairmanship of the NTC.

“Translation brings communities together by ensuring effective communication between the Government and the people, and between communities... Producing quality translation is thus respecting our different ethnic communities. This is why the work of the NTC is important.”

— Minister for Transport Chee Hong Tat on his time as NTC chairperson from 2015 to 2018.

Launched Community-in-Translation (CiT) to support initiatives that raise public awareness and interest in translation.



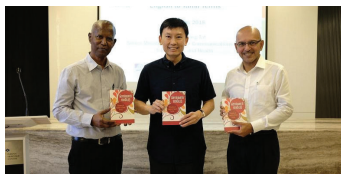
CiT supported the inaugural Chinese Translation Workshop for students.

2017

Developed SG Translate, a Machine Translation engine for Singapore, together with A*STAR Institute for Infocomm Research (I²R) and with the support of Smart Nation Programme Office.



Launched the English-Tamil Bilingual Glossary in collaboration with the Tamil Language Council.



The late A. Palaniappan, then Head of the NTC Tamil Resource Panel (left), then SMS Chee Hong Tat (centre) and R. Rajaram, then Chairman of the Tamil Language Council (right). (Photo Courtesy of Tamil Language Council)

SMS Sim Ann returned as NTC Chairperson.

Launched the Translation Talent Development Scheme (TTDS) to help the private sector deepen their skills.



SMS Sim Ann (centre) and the first batch of TTDS recipients.

2019

Launched the SG Translate engine to the whole of Government.

Hosted the Translation Automation User Society (TAUS) Asia Conference in Singapore, which welcomed 211 attendees from 23 countries.



SMS Sim Ann welcoming attendees at the conference. (Photo Courtesy of TAUS)

2020

Introduced the Community-in-Translation Events Grant (CiTEG) to support translation-related events.



COMMUNITY-IN-TRANSLATION
EVENTS GRANT

2021

Introduced the Citizen Translators Project to enlist volunteers to flag translation errors and take on tasks such as vetting the translation of government communication materials.



SMS Sim Ann engaging Citizen Translators online during the pandemic.

Then MOS Tan Kiat How took over as NTC Chairperson.

2022

Launched the SG Translate Together web portal to host the SG Translate engine for public access.



SMS Tan Kiat How (right) at the launch of the SGTT web portal.

2023

Launched the first in-person Citizen Translators Engagement Session for discussions of translation-related issues.



SMS Tan Kiat How and close to 200 Citizen Translators at the engagement session.

2024

The NTC celebrates its 10th anniversary.



**Faster.
Better.
Together.**

The NTC raises translation standards by working with technology, supporting and grooming talents, and partnering the community to foster interest in translation.

Embracing Technology for Better Translations

The potential of a Machine Translation (MT) engine to raise Singapore's translation standards and productivity is immense. In 2019, the NTC partnered various government agencies to develop a translation engine that caters to Singapore's local context and has continued to grow it with the community.

SG Translate (SGT)

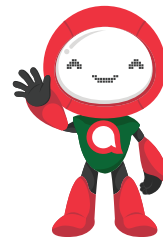
An MT engine jointly developed with A*STAR Institute for Infocomm Research (I²R) to generate localised translations.

SG Translate Together (SGTT)

A web portal that provides public access to SGT. Beyond serving as a one-stop portal for translation resources, SGTT uses GovTech's CrowdTaskSG technology to crowdsource translations and engage the community in reviewing and enhancing the accuracy of SGT. Since its launch, SGTT has attracted over 269,000 visits; and generated more than 20,000 translations monthly on average.



Public service officers learning how to use SG Translate.



wiTty is the friendly robot mascot for the SG Translate Together web portal and stands for Wise, Informative, Translate Together and Youthful.

The Making of Singapore's Own Translation Engine



Kenneth Lo (left) and Eileen Chia (right) from GovTech.

When she was a communications professional in the public service, Eileen Chia found translating government terms challenging, despite majoring in linguistics and multilingual studies.

“It wasn’t easy, as there were specific nuances to consider,” she explains.

But this changed when SG Translate, an MT engine, was rolled out in the public service to address local contexts and standardise translations across the Government. Eileen, who by then had joined GovTech as a product manager, was “awe struck” by its ability. It was a game changer, she says. “If only I had this tool back then.”

SG Translate was initiated by the National Translation Committee (NTC), which has been looking to leverage technology to raise translation standards and productivity since its inception in 2014.



Zheng Weihua (left) and Wu Kui (right) from I²R helped to train the MT engine for SG Translate.

One example is MT engines, which have long existed, but off-the-shelf models often fail to account for local contexts. The committee decided to build a localised MT engine for Singapore. It brought together computer scientists and engineers from A*STAR Institute for Infocomm Research (I²R), engineers and designers from GovTech, and language experts across the then Ministry of Communications and Information — all of whom were excited to contribute.

“Machine translation is an intriguing intersection of linguistics, computer science and artificial intelligence,” says Wu Kui, a senior scientist from I²R. “I have always been amazed by how technology can build pathways between languages and facilitate communications.”

For Jestin Ng, project manager at the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI), the project was an opportunity to make a positive impact through technology. “By providing accurate and reliable translation capabilities, the technology can contribute to a more inclusive and cohesive society, where all citizens can access and understand important information and services provided by the Government,” she says.

Overcoming a Lack of Data

A key part of developing an MT engine is training. To produce translations that align with Singapore's cultural norms and preferences, the team had to source and curate local data, such as names of government organisations, landmarks and streets in Singapore. As there were not enough samples to ensure sufficient accuracy, the I²R team had to develop various machine training techniques — including data augmentation and low resource training — to synthetically generate more samples instead. This was particularly crucial for supporting translation between English and Tamil, as there was relatively fewer bilingual data available for this language pair.

“The other reason why Tamil was challenging was because we ourselves didn't understand the language,” says Zheng Weihua, a senior engineer at I²R. “We drew on the expertise of Tamil language linguists to help us tackle complex linguistic issues.”

While the goal was to automate translation, the expertise of human professionals was crucial in enhancing the MT engine's output. To facilitate this, I²R partnered GovTech to create SG Translate Together (SGTT), an online portal that allows the public to use the SG Translate (SGT) MT engine. During development, GovTech engineer Kenneth Lo learnt that languages have unique logic and structure. For instance, while developing a feature to truncate text for better display on mobile devices, he realised that this could alter the meaning of Tamil words.

“I gained a deeper understanding of Singapore's official languages and a greater appreciation for the complexities of translation work,” he reflects.



SGTT has been introduced to the public at various roving outreach programmes.

A Timely Launch

In 2019, SGT was launched in the public service just in time to play a critical role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The MT engine helped to generate first-cut translations of important government messages to speed up public dissemination. The public online portal, SGTT, was rolled out three years later and quickly gained a following. It has even attracted law firms to use it to translate legal terms.

These point to the potential for SGT and SGTT to be expanded, says Daphne Tay, then MDDI digital business analyst who oversaw the development of both products. She and her team have since transformed the SGTT portal into a one-stop platform for the translation community to tap on translation resources, exchange views and stay updated on translation-related events.

One team member involved in these enhancements was none other than Eileen, an early advocate who now manages SGTT.

“Contributing to something that not only aligns with my values but also has the potential to help others facing similar challenges has made the experience incredibly rewarding,” she shares.

Nurturing the Next Generation of Translation Talents

Since 2015, the NTC has nurtured young Singaporeans with strong interest in translation and deep familiarity with the local landscape. A scholarship and a training award have been introduced to help build a community of skilled translation talents both in the public and private sectors:

Translation Talent Development Scheme (TTDS)

Provides Singaporean translation and interpretation practitioners from the private sector a training award to deepen their skills. TTDS covers 90 per cent of expenses, up to \$10,000, for recipients' translation and interpretation-related training programmes. Over S\$240,000 has been disbursed to 36 TTDS recipients as of March 2024.

Information Service (Translation) Scholarship

Covers tuition fees and provides allowances for individuals with interest in both government communications and translation work. To date, 14 recipients have been awarded the Information Service (Translation) Scholarships since 2015.



2019 TTDS recipients with SMS Sim Ann (centre).



2022 Information Service (Translation) scholar Afifa Shafana (second from right) and her parents with Minister Josephine Teo.



“The TTDS scheme has given me more opportunities to explore courses related to translation. I also got to meet people who share a similar interest in translation.”

—

Nor Djannah
2023 TTDS recipient

A Born Translator

Jeremiah Joel Peter was only 11 years old when he worked on his first paid translation job. The boy raised in a family of three Tamil-speaking monolinguals was known to family and friends to be proficient in both languages.

Although it is hardly a surprise that he now works as a translator in the MDDI, this career option was not obvious to him growing up.

“I did not as a young person have huge dreams of pursuing translation as a career because I did not know such opportunities existed for Tamil speakers in Singapore,” says Jeremiah, who sustained his interest in the language by studying Higher Tamil and Literature in Tamil in secondary school.

That was until he came across MDDI’s Information Service (Translation) Scholarship in 2015 while searching for grants to support his university education after completing a diploma in mass communications. “I thought to myself, ‘Not only do I get to do communications work, but also get to use the Tamil language? Sign me up!’” he says. And the rest is history.

While pursuing a bachelor’s degree in public policy and global affairs at Nanyang Technological University, Jeremiah also completed a minor in linguistics. He studied topics such as socio and historical linguistics, which honed his appreciation of Tamil’s distinct language qualities and his linguistic identity.

“Without a career in translation waiting for me upon graduation, where my knowledge can be applied, spending my expensive university education pursuing these niche interests of mine might have seemed imprudent,” says the 29-year-old.

Looking ahead, Jeremiah envisions a bright future for Tamil language in Singapore. There are many opportunities to further one’s interest in the language, be it in academia, the media or even technology, he explains.

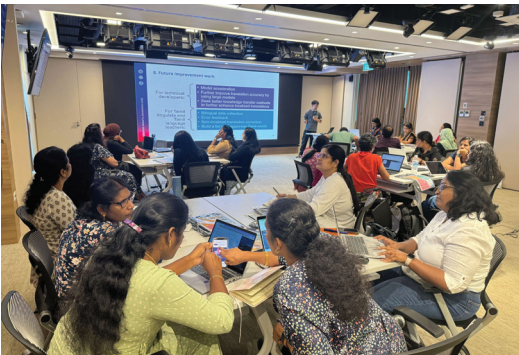
“There are still significant career opportunities that value Tamil proficiency, and I dare say those opportunities are only growing!”



One Language, Many Ways	English	Tamil Word Used in Singapore	Tamil Word Used Elsewhere
Tamil is highly diglossic, which means it has different written and spoken forms. It also has several regional variations. Jeremiah tracks the use of Tamil words in Singapore to ensure translations are local and current.	President	Athibar அதிபர்	Janathipathi ஜனாதிபதி
	Percentage	Vizhukkaadu விழுக்காடு	Sathaveetham சதவீதம்
	Hospital	Maruthuvamanai மருத்துவமனை	Vaithiyasaalai வைத்தியசாலை

Partnering the Community

To raise translation and language standards in Singapore, the NTC has several initiatives that tap into the expertise of our translation community, engage individuals who have an interest in translation and provide support for translation-related public initiatives:



Over the years, the NTC has supported various translation seminars, workshops and competitions to engage the community across all ages and languages.



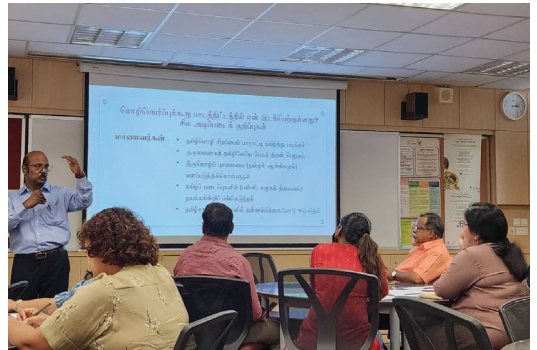
Citizen Translators (CT) Project

Enlists volunteers to vet and proofread government communication materials. The CTs also identify translation errors and propose corrections. Today, there are over 2,500 members aged 15 to 88.



Community-in-Translation (CiT) Workshops

Co-organises translation-related workshops with organisations and schools. Since 2016, 15 sessions have been held.



CiT Events Grant (CiTEG)

Provides funding for ground-up initiatives focused on translation. Between 2020 to June 2024, the grant has supported close to 60 events.



Meet Our Translation Community

They come from professions and ages across all walks of life but share a common interest in improving communications — not only between

Fulfilling a Lifelong Dream



Heidi Mah became a translator after completing a Bachelor of Arts in Translation and Interpretation at age 71. She has participated in the review of Singpass, TokenGoWhere and Healthier SG materials.

“It has always been my dream to work as a translator but I could not fulfil it because of family and work commitments. As a senior manager in a public hospital, I was sometimes asked to translate medical information into Mandarin or Chinese dialects for patients. After my retirement, I signed up to study for a translation degree. My children thought I was joking, but I was determined. Since graduating in 2021, I have translated a website about caregiving and was able to use my knowledge in healthcare. I also became a Citizen Translator to expand my knowledge and had picked up many terms specific to Singapore.”

Spotting Errors, Sparking Change



Sundar Plavenderraj Arockiyaraj is an environmental, health and safety manager at a pharmaceutical company. Since young, it has been his hobby to spot translation errors in public spaces.

“Whenever I come across a bilingual poster or banner, I pause to check for errors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I spotted typographical and translation errors in the Tamil language posters of a clinic in my neighbourhood, so I contacted them. They replaced all the posters with the correct translation that I sent them. We must be aware of, and act on, such errors to make a positive change. When I heard about the Citizen Translators project, I immediately signed up to play my part. It was a valuable opportunity to meet other CTs who share my interest and passion.”



Hear more about Heidi's lifelong journey in translation!

Government and the people but also between communities. Citizen Translators volunteer to check the accuracy and appropriate nuancing

of translations, and have worked on projects ranging from the Singpass and TraceTogether apps to the Healthier SG website.

Pioneering Translation Communities



Bashir Basalamah is a freelance translator-interpreter and a member of the NTC Malay Resource Panel. In the early days of the Internet, he started an e-forum to host community discussions of Malay translation.

“In 1997, I set up two mailing lists with my Indonesian and Malaysian colleagues to discuss Indonesian and Malay translations. It was the early days of the Internet in Singapore, and these were email-based precursors to the online communities of today. But we had the same purpose: to share knowledge and information, build a community, help and encourage one another. The opportunity to meet other translators, to learn and to contribute was very meaningful to me.”

Making His Passion Possible



Jonas Fine Tan Wen Ze is a student and part-time researcher at the University of Oxford. He has been volunteering as an interpreter with NGOs and is conversant in 12 languages.

“Volunteering as a Citizen Translator allows me to combine my passion for translation and social work, and make Singapore a more equitable place for people of diverse backgrounds. I was really happy to attend the Citizen Translators Engagement Session and meet other like-minded people who are passionate about maintaining Singapore’s linguistic diversity and increasing information accessibility to mother tongue speakers. The Citizen Translator initiative has reintroduced our Mother Tongue Languages to the official contexts and I believe this will bolster their use for years to come.”



Learn how Bashir built his own translation community.



Keen to become a Citizen Translator?
Find out more!

Compete to Learn: A Teenage Polyglot Spreads Her Love for Languages



What prompted a seven-year-old who already knows four languages to learn the fifth, sixth and, eventually, the eleventh?

For Loy Xing-Yi, it happened when a woman asked her for directions in Vietnamese. Despite having learnt English, Mandarin, French and Japanese even before enrolling in primary school, she felt inadequate in that instant.

“I was disappointed,” Xing-Yi recounts. “I realised if I wanted to communicate with more people I would need to learn a lot more.”

Today, the 16-year-old is conversant in 11 languages and the founder of Polyglot Club SG. She set up the club in 2020 for language enthusiasts like herself and to make language learning more accessible for others. Together with friends whom she recruited, they began giving free tuitions to anyone who was keen to learn. In the following year, they started an annual webinar to help Primary Six students decide on their third language. Some 700 students have attended the event so far.

In 2023, Xing-Yi noticed that Singapore lacked translation competitions which would be useful for honing language skills. So, she organised the first Nationwide Foreign Language Translation Competition in the same year with the support of NTC's Community-in-Translation Events Grant.

"I wasn't sure if I would get the grant because I was only 15 when I applied for it. I'm very grateful to the NTC for putting their faith in me, allowing me to successfully organise this competition," she says.

Participants had two weeks to translate famous literary works in Japanese, German, French and Spanish to English or Chinese, and could win more than \$1,200 worth of prizes. The competition attracted almost 200 entries, all thanks to the Ministry of Education Language Centre and various schools that came onboard to help Xing-Yi publicise the competition.

She was pleasantly surprised when some of the participants reached out to express their gratitude. "They told me the competition gave them a reason to engage languages outside of the classrooms and increased their interest in them," says Xing-Yi.

The positive response has spurred her to continue advocating for the learning of languages, especially among the youth. "I intend to carry on with the competition next year," she says. "Hopefully with the NTC again!"



Xing-Yi shares
five steps to
learning a new
language!

Translating the Future

Over the last 10 years, the National Translation Committee (NTC) has enhanced translation capabilities in the Government and the industry by collaborating and co-creating solutions with various communities. We will continue doing so by embracing technology, grooming future talents, and in turn promote intercultural appreciation and community bonding.

“The next phase of work for the NTC is to continue nourishing and nurturing the translation community by growing talent and bringing together a community of like-minded individuals. We must also continue to use technology to help us do our work better and faster, and create new vista and opportunities for the future.”

Tan Kiat How
NTC Chairperson
Senior Minister of State for
Digital Development and Information & National Development



Find out the significance of NTC's work and why bilingualism matters.



Learn how SMS Tan picked himself up after failing Chinese and his views on how technology can offer new opportunities for translators.

Embracing Technology

Augmenting Capabilities and Improving Efficiency

As machine translations become more accurate and effective, we will harness this technology to streamline workflow and raise translation standards. For example, professional translators may employ machine translation to generate first draft translation, freeing themselves to focus on more complex and nuanced editing tasks. This sharpens the necessary role of human expertise in contextualising translations based on local cultural knowledge, particularly in multiracial and multilingual Singapore.



“Language and translation are about context and meaning. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) has come a long way in terms of grammatical accuracy, it may not capture the context and intention of language accurately. The human aspect is what makes or breaks a translation. As such, I feel that the translation community is not as threatened as we might expect, and AI poses a great opportunity for the community to benefit from.”

—
Jonas Fine Tan Wen Ze
Citizen Translator and student

Creating New Job Roles

The successful applications of translation technology in real-life situations rest heavily on the effective training of large language models (LLMs). Human translators will be required to teach these machines to understand and produce human-like language. Digital service providers operating in different markets, such as digital banks and gaming companies, will also require human translators to localise their service and optimise user experience.



“AI makes human translators even more important. For example, we Malays sometimes sugarcoat our words. AI cannot comprehend that, when we say ‘budak bertuah’ (‘lucky boy’), we are actually reprimanding the child. We will not be redundant. In fact, our perspectives will be key to communicating the right meanings.”

—
Djohan Abdul Rahman
Citizen Translator and Malay language teacher



Discover how Djohan inspired his daughter to develop an interest in translation too.

Nurturing Talent

Fostering an Interest Among Youths

The NTC will continue to work with partners to build and deepen interest in language and translation among youth, though not necessarily for the pursuit of a career. Gen Zs use social media widely and we will leverage that to engage them outside of the traditional learning environment to make the learning of Mother Tongue Languages fun and attractive.



“Translation is more than just a transactional process of writing from one language to another. You keep in touch with many values and sensitivities from the languages you speak, which always value adds to you as a person.”

—
Siti Amirah Binte Mohd Amin
Information Service (Translation) Scholar and Senior
Manager (Media Relations), Ministry of Social and Family
Development

Building Bilingual and Bicultural Assets

Being bilingual or multilingual is an asset which helps to develop proficiencies in understanding different cultures, traditions and practices. We will strengthen bilingual capabilities and nurture the next generation of bilinguals and multilinguals who will have the technological skills and cultural intelligence to navigate diverse communities and workplaces, and maintain their competitive advantage in the global economy.



“My vision for the future of translation and Citizen Translators in Singapore is to involve more youths. We need to do away with the stereotype that young people these days are ‘clueless’ about the Chinese language or that they ‘*jiak kantang*’. Young people need to come forward. But of course, to do that, the translation sector needs to be attractive.”

—
Eddy Chua
Citizen Translator and creative producer

Connecting Communities

Preserving Cultures for Our Younger Generation

Cultural knowledge is embedded in language. Our youth need to be proficient in their Mother Tongue Language to access this knowledge. We will work with partners to incorporate translation in the teaching of languages to enhance our students' bilingual proficiency and their appreciation of their own culture.



“We must not lose sight of the core purpose of translation as a connector, enabling different communities to understand each other. Maintaining a human element that allows us to engage with, rather than just speak to one another, will be very important.”

—
Ganardhipan Mathialaku
Citizen Translator and senior specialist
at Migrant Workers' Centre

Enhancing Intercultural Connections

Translation enables our different communities to gain understanding of one another. With the help of technology, we will be able to translate literature from one Mother Tongue Language to another — without English as the intermediary — to reduce interpretive barriers and enhance intercultural communication and appreciation.



“English literature boasts a rich tapestry of works by renowned authors. Translating these masterpieces into Tamil would not only expand our knowledge and understanding of literary art but also deepen our appreciation for both languages. By bringing out the beauty of Tamil through translation, we can ensure its continued vitality and growth.”

—
Dr M. Govindaraju
Citizen Translator and proprietor



Govindaraju shares his experience translating a children's story from English to Tamil.



To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the National Translation Committee (NTC), Citizen Translators were invited to a community batik making session and took turns to add colours to a batik featuring the committee's anniversary logo. The completed piece represents the vital role of the community in supporting NTC's efforts to raise the overall translation and language standards in Singapore.

**The National Translation
Committee wishes to
thank all individuals who
have contributed to
its work in one way or
another over the decade.**

Since its establishment in 2014, the National Translation Committee has brought the public, private and people sectors together to raise the standards of translation in multilingual Singapore.

Word by Word: Connecting Communities Through Translation recounts this decade-long journey of growing the translation community by leveraging new technologies, supporting professional development and nurturing the next generation of talents. These efforts have helped preserved Singapore's unique multicultural heritage while allowing Singaporeans to better understand one another through crises and their everyday lives.

