

# Breaking the Silence Project

Centre for  
**Inclusive**  
**Design**



# Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Lands on which this report was prepared, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the Wiradjuri people, particularly Deaf Mob for their partnership in this work.

We recognise their continuing connection to this Land, which is, and always will be, Aboriginal Land.

## With thanks

The researchers involved in contributing and testing this framework include:

- Jody Barney: Project Manger and Cultural Lead,
- Daniel Bachi: Cultural Tech support,
- Vivienne Freeman: Cultural community support,
- Julie Judd, Daniel Hately: Auslan interpreters,
- Prof. Katie Ellis and Prof Chris Lawrence: Curtin University,
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- Members of the Western NSW Deaf Community, and
- Cultural Advisory committee for their support through the project. For details on the cultural advisory committee please contact jody Barney, project lead.

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# 1.0 Introduction

This framework was completed as part of a broader project, *Breaking the Silence* funded through an AIATSIS grant.

The aim was to co-design a framework, methodology, and action-research prototype for an artificial intelligence (AI) driven translation tool providing functionality to support communication between English, Auslan, and DeafMob, looking to communicate more effectively.

The research questions broadly addressed:

- determining how to co-create a framework for developing the tool so it can be accessible, usable, and useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as well as mainstream organisations in Health and Justice,
- determining what the AI (machine learning model) needs to look like to be culturally appropriate, accurate, and safe, and whether an AI-driven translation tool can help (or not) people who use visual language in Justice and Health contexts, and
- co-creating a functioning prototype of the AI translation tool for further testing with wider communities.

Ways of being, knowing, and doing differ from community to community, and it is important to acknowledge and be aware of these differences and the protocols that exist within each community.

This framework was also not created in a vacuum but relied on the work conducted through **the Indigenous Protocols and Artificial Intelligence Working Group**. Its focus was to provide a guide for Non-Deaf, non-Indigenous people on how to engage and work in a collaborative way, to cause less harm and to learn from DeafMob. Additional reading is provided at the end.

The aim of this framework was to provide a starting point for non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers working with DeafMob and was created as a piece of action research. It includes insight of what worked and what we would have done differently. The work was heavily framed by reflective practice and beliefs around reciprocity rather than support.

## 1.1 Key learnings for AI research that are implicit in the framework.

This framework has been created so it can be used across a range of projects and, it must be noted, the findings are clear on this point. Therefore:

- any AI tool prototype should focus on areas AI can deliver the most value to the interaction that cannot be otherwise met, and
- any AI tool should not be used to replace interpreters or family in situations where it is appropriate for them to support interaction for the provision of legal or health advice, or in contextual understanding.

This framework has been a collaborative effort and has been strongly guided by Jody Barney, the project lead. We thank her for her wisdom.

# 1. Definitions

A few notes on the language used within the document.

**Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander:** any person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and is recognised by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community in which they live as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

**Country:** with a capital C refers to the nation or cultural group and Land Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people belong to.

**DeafMob:** refers to individuals who culturally identify as Deaf and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

**Culturally appropriate:** in this framework it refers to both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Culture and/or Deaf Culture and/or DeafMob Culture

**Note:** in some instances, we have used the word Indigenous where the term was used by participants to self identify.

## 2. The framework

### 4.1 The team

- It is important to have people with lived experience in lead project roles, particularly when dealing with the complex intersectional issues of being both Deaf and Indigenous.
- As non-Indigenous researchers, we operate in an ableist/ Western construct regardless of our intentions. Our funding, expertise, education, and practices are biased towards this approach. While we can be Culturally sensitive, we will always be at the intersection of different cultures and need to continually be self-reflective.
- People with lived experience need to have support from their community. This was supported by Culturally appropriate advisory groups one step removed from the project.
- It was also critical to including both male and female researchers and interpreters on the project.
- When working with a diverse research group it was important to start the project on Country. This included designing the project and having those first conversations together as a project team.
- For work in this area it's important to budget in time and funds for Cultural advisory groups, additional time on Country. Interpreters chosen by Deaf researchers need to be used and provided for non-workshop times. It's also important to recognise the community and family requirements that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers and community advisory have which need to be prioritised should an issue occur.
- For community work, all staff must have working with children checks. Family member often support DeafMob or DeafMob are carers.

#### 4.1.1 Working together as a project team

Approaches to building relationships within the project team can include:

- in-person meetings and conversations to invite new project team members into the project,
- new team members valued having time to read and if Deaf practice the session facilitation beforehand and to provide input into appropriate examples and amend the project design,
- at each step, identify who is the right person for a particular activity within the session, and ensure everyone in the project team has a shared understanding,
- having a sense of humour (and biscuits!) was useful.

Insights into working with interpreters on the project:

- there was need to have multiple interpreters involved in the fieldwork,
- interpreters needed to be flexible and work in a team to achieve the goals of the team,

- where interpreters need to work at the same time to translate between participants and project team members, two sets of interpreters would be optimum,
- interpreters can verbalise who they are interpreting for in audio recordings which is useful for transcription and synthesis of the research data,
- it was important to recognise some participants had not been exposed to Auslan interpretation, so strategies differed depending on the Auslan capability of participants, and
- recognise interpreters are there for both parties in a conversation, though the Deaf person is most discriminated against in society and must be prioritised over hearing researchers.

#### **4.1.2 Benefits and impact of a diverse research team**

Having a diverse research group delivers benefits. These include:

- research participants are able to 'bounce off' each other's ideas during group sessions,
- all participants saw members of their community in leadership positions, and service providers can also meet and interact with leaders from the sector,
- the research team mutually learned from each other, in areas of each other's expertise, with Indigenous teams solving design issues, non-Indigenous team members supporting logistics, and sharing stories and learning Auslan signs, and more,
- participants having the opportunity to speak and be heard, with an Auslan interpreter provided at no cost to them, and
- the support services listed in the Participant Information Sheet provided participants with contact details can be useful beyond the context of the project.

## **4.2 Building relationships with the community**

Role of initial trips in building relationship with the community/participants:

- Aboriginal researchers (if not on Country) will need to go out into the community first (with or without interpreters) to build relationships and organise the research activities.
  - This should occur at least one month in advance of the data collection.
  - Attending community events allows the project team to get to know community.
  - Having a community base group helps in organising activities, however, may not always be possible when working with very small communities.
- Communities value the same researchers 'coming back' to continue the engagement.

Time needs to be allocated for relationship building both formal and informal. This time may include:

- participants putting project team members in contact with their networks (e.g., on Facetime calls),
- Aboriginal project team members vouching for non-Aboriginal interpreters, and



- Exchanging mutual contacts 'brought barriers right down' between Aboriginal researchers and Deaf Aboriginal participants, and

### 4.3 Recruitment

- Projects benefit from having 'someone on the ground' (e.g., close partnership with local organisation) to coordinate recruitment.
- Need to recognise Aboriginal organisations and communities might not be receptive to the project team 'using Aboriginal people as a ticket' into the community and taking care of the 'groundwork' but not the 'power work' of the project. This must be carefully managed through the recruitment process.
- Coordinating the project team and participants' schedules is complex and requires resources.
- Aboriginal researchers may use personal phones and Facebook accounts for contacting prospective participants. While using a business/organisational accounts can make this interaction more professional, it can cause trust issues. This is a risk that needs to be considered on a case by case basis.
- Recruitment flyers without dates need to be sent out early in the project to let the community and service providers know what is going to happen in the project (e.g., within the next 12 months).
  - In some circumstances, it's appropriate for the project team to communicate verbally first rather than sending the flyer.
- Some participants may not be confident to type or use email to communicate with the research team, so other ways of communicating need to be used like Messenger and Facetime.
- Aboriginal Deaf participants may be uncertain if they have relevant experience to contribute to research. Explain the value of their contributions is to help other people like themselves.
- Snowball recruitment through word of mouth is invaluable. Engaging with trusted people and staying on location for additional days will support this work, with service providers/participants proactively contacting others if they are comfortable with the team and approach.
- All participants must be paid for their time. (mandatory)

### 4.4 Communication needs and preferences

- Have Culturally appropriate interpreters who are able to translate for groups, sometimes employed from outside the subject community,
- at least two interpreters per session,
- restrict data collection to two hours, given interpreters are working with many individuals,
- where some people didn't want to talk through interpreters, ensure you have a Deaf Facilitator,
- have a space where everyone can see everyone else, and
- allocate double the expected time for activities and materials given it is impossible to both sign and read material concurrently.

Choosing interpreters. Trust and rapport are needed throughout the research.

- Interpreters need to be members of one of two professional bodies, NAATI or ASLIA,
- they need to be vouched for by Deaf researchers on the project,
- when choosing interpreters, pick those with a strong Deaf cultural background. If possible, Aboriginal interpreters should be used,
- having the same interpreters involved ensured understanding of the project and rapport carried over across the field trips, and
- book interpreters well in advance.

## 4.5 Facilitating the sessions

Guidance from cultural facilitators and project lead will ensure ethical and cultural safety. This needs to be discussed prior to sessions. Examples of what was required can include:

- non-Aboriginal facilitators remaining in the background unless called on by the Aboriginal Facilitators so as not to overwhelm participants,
- interpreters sharing if they have Deaf family members, building a connection, even when the interpreters are not Aboriginal,
- talking about sign names with participants.
- interpreters empathising with participants (“I’m so happy for you”) rather than remaining neutral.
- the Project team acknowledging and spending time with participants’ children/family, making sure everyone in the room feels included even if they are not active participants,
- a lot of humour and jokes to build rapport,
- food for all participants, and access to play activities and areas for children,
- project team to also eat with participants,
- assessing the power dynamic and actively changing it, for example Aboriginal researchers respond first or correct non Aboriginal researchers to create safety in the room for participants,
- interpreters checking on how people’s names are spelt, and
- interpreters learning or checking signs for particular words with participants (e.g., the sign for ‘Torres Strait Islander’).

Ground rules should be explicitly introduced at the beginning of the sessions. For example:

- one person talking at a time so interpreters can keep up,
- making sure to respect each other, not argue with each other,
- if you want to say something, raise your hand,
- fire evacuation procedures are demonstrated, and break areas provided,
- participants are allowed to pull Cultural/community support persons aside at any time for a debrief, and
- providing Deaf Aboriginal participants with a written consent/oral/signed consent process.

The research team introductions can include:

- who they are, where they are from, and how they identify (e.g., whether they are hearing, Deaf, Auslan users, etc.),
- their cultural background, and how the project came about, and
- non-Aboriginal people should also speak about where they are from and acknowledge the local Traditional Custodians of that Country.

When running a session:

- interviewing a smaller number of Deaf Aboriginal people within the same session, with similar communication styles, is better than having a large group,
- balance the interpreters' workload with the dynamics of the participants in the room,
- do not to have more researchers/interpreters than participants.
- Deaf Aboriginal researchers should lead sessions with Deaf Aboriginal participants, and
- have a questions guide with outcomes and looser recorded conversations rather than tightly structured questions.

The interview room environment:

- needs to be as inviting as possible and comfortable, allowing people to sit where and how they wished, including on the floor,
- should be community based, and
- if preferred, interview at home without non-Deaf, non-Indigenous facilitators, however, balance this request with who would also be in those spaces, such as other family members.

The research team can extend care to research participants in the following ways:

- transporting people to and from the sessions,
- checking what participants would like to eat prior to ordering lunch,
- providing participants with pillows and other items to make them feel comfortable,
- looking after participants' children (e.g., taking them on the lunch run) while more sensitive issues relating to justice are discussed,
- having tea and coffee available, and
- asking whether participants are distracted by seeing themselves on the screen prior to video sessions.

## 4.6 Insights into communicating AI

### 4.6.1 Relating AI to concrete examples

For DeafMob in regional and remote areas, it is important to recognise that we need to adapt our conversations on technology to have meaningful dialogue.

There was a need to relate AI to concrete examples that participants are familiar with (e.g., using Convo in McDonalds, Google Translate etc).

- Using examples relevant to people's lives helps them to understand abstract AI concepts,
- examples should be acted out or shown on the screen during sessions,

- showing people relatable pictures/visuals may work as a way of building understanding, and
- examples needed to be as concrete and literal as possible.

Strategies and language the research team can use to explain AI to participants:

- explaining how AI works by describing a scenario, like being at the hospital,
- showing people what the app will look like, and
- relating AI to things participants have discussed or offered (e.g., including a person's own sign for 'court' in the app).

#### **4.6.2 Low digital literacy**

Considerations when working with AI in areas where there is low digital literacy and access, and low literacy more generally:

- know who is doing most of the speaking, the participants or project team, if the project team is doing most of the speaking change the research approach,
- questions about real experiences the responses are richer than broader abstract questions like, 'what do you think?', where there are too many variables,
- when participants are not familiar with AI it makes it 'hard to imagine' so provide examples of the AI products they already use (such as avatar augmentation),
- it can sometimes be difficult to differentiate between past present and future, through Auslan signing, particularly for people with low written and sign communication, and
- be aware it is difficult for Deaf people and interpreters signing to pay attention to more than one thing at once (such as looking at an object while signing at the same time).

#### **4.6.3 Feedback and connection:**

- Aboriginal consultants to be recognised as subject matter experts. The research team may work with experts at certain stages of the project to create appropriate and concrete examples that will work in community.
- Community participants must be acknowledged in a feedback loop in ensuring the tech works on Country for Country.

## 3. Bibliography

### 3.1 Relevant literature

We used the Indigenous Protocols and Artificial Intelligence position paper developed by the Indigenous Protocols and Artificial Intelligence Working Group. Available here: [Indigenous Protocol and AI 2020.pdf \(concordia.ca\)](https://www.concordia.ca/indigenous-protocols-and-ai-2020.pdf)

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