

LANGUAGES AND YOUR PRODUCT SAFETY LABELS



By Erin Earley

With this year's On Your Mark columns, we're back with a new author, but with content that's informed by the same safety label standards expertise that we've been bringing you for the past six years. In our 2017 series, each quarter we'll explore a new trend or topic on the leading edge of safety communication. Our focus this month: effectively using languages on your product safety labels.

The question of whether or not to use additional languages on your safety labels can be a complex one to answer. At Clarion Safety Systems, our insight into product and workplace safety communication comes from two primary sources: working with our clients' engineering teams to design safety sign and label systems for thousands of products and facilities, and our leadership roles on the ANSI and ISO committees responsible for writing and revising the latest standards related to risk communication. Languages are a reoccurring topic that we've seen as a struggle point for both clients and the standards committees. Read on for a look at your options – compiled from our perspective of assisting companies and the standards committees wrestle with this topic.

DIVERSITY'S IMPACT ON SAFETY

The U.S. population includes an incredibly wide range of language diversity. Over 350 languages are now spoken in American homes.¹ Work environments, too, are becoming more and more diverse. Combine this fact with the need for safety signs and labels to be able to be quickly and easily understood so people can gain an immediate awareness of hazards and avoid accidents and injuries, and you have a problem.

1. Source: United States Census Bureau report released November 2015, titled: "Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over: 2009-2013."

What if your audience can't read English? Currently there is no obligation in the U.S.² to provide warnings in multiple languages on products. Yet for product manufacturers, the goal is always to put a safe product into the marketplace. This often means providing adequate warnings when hazards can't be designed out of the product. With all of these factors in play, the key question is: how do you ensure that your potentially lifesaving on-product warnings are effectively understood by your intended audience, which may contain people who can't read English?

THE STANDARDS' BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE

When it comes to U.S. product safety label best practices, your starting point is the ANSI Z535 standards. These standards cover safety communication on signs, labels, tags and in manuals. ANSI Z535.4, the product safety label standard, has a large degree of flexibility built into the format options it gives manufacturers for their safety labels. In addition, in the standard's Section 3.1.1 and Annex C, it allows manufacturers to use product safety label formats

2. It should be noted that this differs for products being sold into Europe. Here, the EU Machinery Directive must be followed. Its section 1.7.1 states that when words need to be used in warnings, they must be translated into the language of the country where the machine is placed on the market or into service. On request, additional languages can be asked for by the purchaser.

contained in ISO 3864-2, the international standard for product safety labels. The option to use international formats is an important one, as it emphasizes the need to use symbols to communicate across language barriers.

When it comes to the issue of languages on safety labels, here’s what ANSI Z535.4 says in its Annex B, Section 5:

“If it is determined that additional languages are desired on a safety sign, the following formats should be considered. In all examples, the use of symbols is strongly encouraged in order to better communicate the sign’s hazard information across language barriers.”

In this excerpt, there is one especially important design aspect that should be noted: symbols are key to communicating safety, especially to a multilingual audience. Symbols represent the state-of-the-art for conveying information quickly and across language barriers and their use, informed by the ISO standards, have become an integral part of product safety label design.

This section of the standard goes on to illustrate a number of multilingual safety label formats that combine English and foreign language text and signal word panels onto a single safety label, including vertical and horizontal options that can be modified to include multiple word message panels and multiple signal word panels. See *Label A* in Figure 1 for an example. Other formatting options include standalone foreign language safety labels (that are, essentially, translated versions of the entire label) shown in Figure 1’s *Label B*, or “add-on” foreign language labels placed beside the English label, shown in Figure 1’s *Label C*.

SELECTION OF LANGUAGES

How do you select the language or languages to use on your U.S. product safety labels? In addition to English, is there a preferred second language? The phrasing in Annex B, Section 5 speaks to this: “If it is determined that additional languages are desired...” ANSI Z535 *does not* make the determination as to what specific languages should be used. And for good reason.

The ANSI Z535 committee explored the issue of language selection more than two decades ago when a proposal was submitted asking that the standards include Spanish translations for signal words. The committee agreed on the benefit of having definitive

translations for signal words but it disagreed on only including Spanish, fearing that such a choice would send a message that the preferred second language for safety signs and labels is Spanish. Instead, the committee created Annex D: a table of signal words translated into over two dozen languages, from Arabic to Vietnamese.

The committee wouldn’t definitively state which additional languages to use on signs and labels because the standards need to be able to be applied across a wide range of industries and products. They aren’t the right place to define this type of requirement. That decision belongs to you – the design engineer, the manufacturer, the facility owner. You’re in the better place to make the determination that your signs and labels may or may not need to use more than one language; you know whether or not your products’ expected audiences would benefit from additional languages. Once you determine that one or more additional languages are needed, your next step should be to use an expert translation company to ensure that accuracy with dialects and context don’t become an issue.



Figure 1: Safety label formatting options using additional languages can include multilingual labels (Label A), foreign language labels (Label B), or add-on foreign language labels (Label C). (Label designs ©Clarion Safety Systems. All rights reserved.)

COMPLEX LABELING

When it's necessary to convey a complex, detailed safety message, crafting an effective multilingual safety label becomes more difficult. An option that the ANSI Z535.4 standard allows is for the label to refer the reader to another source, like the product manual, for more detailed information. With this in mind, one solution is to place a "Read Manual" label (see Figure 2) on the product; the reader is led to the manual where translations of the detailed safety message in the appropriate languages can be shown.

THE FUTURE OF SAFETY COMMUNICATION

A final point to keep in mind as you look ahead to the future of on-product safety labeling: symbol-only formats have gained acceptance in many parts of the world. As the world moves toward labeling that is independent of words, the need for translations and multilingual formats may, in fact, become a thing of the past!


Stay tuned for our next discussion in this year's *On Your Mark* series. Do you have a suggestion for a topic you'd like to see covered? Contact the author at earley@clarionsafety.com. 



Figure 2: A best practice ANSI Z535 safety label, including the ISO 7010 safety symbol for "refer to instruction manual/booklet" (©Clarion Safety Systems. All rights reserved.)

Erin Earley, head of communications at Clarion Safety Systems and a journalist by trade, has researched and written extensively about workplace safety and product safety label trends. Clarion is an active member of the ANSI and ISO standards committees. The company's CEO, Geoffrey Peckham, is chair of the ANSI Z535 Committee for Safety Signs and Colors and of ANSI's U.S. TAG to the ISO standards committee responsible for safety signs, labels, colors and symbols (ISO/TC 145). With over 50 million safety signs and labels in use in over 180 industries worldwide, their goal of making the world a safer place is taking shape. Erin can be reached at earley@clarionsafety.com.