



## TRANSLATORS and INTERPRETERS: Cut From the Same Cloth?

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This chart, prepared for a recent presentation, summarizes some of the differences in skill sets and habitual activities undertaken by translators and interpreters. NAJIT members may find it useful for client education.

TRANSLATORS	INTERPRETERS
<b>Translators must have excellent knowledge of at least two languages but they often work in only one direction</b> , that is, they often translate only from their acquired language into their native language, but not the other way around. Some translators are sufficiently skilled in both languages to translate in both directions, but most don't.	<b>Interpreters must have excellent knowledge of at least two languages and usually must be able to work in both directions.</b> Court, medical and community interpreters work in both directions; some conference and all UN interpreters work only in one direction. The UN rule is that interpreters work only into their mother tongue. Conference and UN interpreters often must have 3 working languages.
<b>Translators must be able to understand complex texts in the source language (usually the foreign language).</b> Written texts can vary greatly in style, content and intended audience. Text-based material usually has all the fluff taken out, leaving only finely honed language. The structure and content of written texts can be clear or convoluted.	<b>Interpreters must grasp a speaker's message and intent immediately, whatever the level of discourse, but usually a spoken message is less complex than a written text.</b> Exception: when speakers <i>read</i> a text (especially a previously prepared technical speech or legal document), it's an added challenge for the interpreter. Speakers read more quickly than they speak, and written language is structurally and semantically more complex than spoken.
<b>Translators must be excellent writers in their chosen target language.</b> They must have a good command of grammar and style and be able to express themselves in any register required by the text or target audience.  Translators keep abreast of material in two languages related to the fields they translate, in order to see what experts in that field discuss and how they express themselves.	<b>Court and conference interpreters must interpret simultaneously, consecutively and also perform sight translation.</b> They must know correct grammar and have an extensive vocabulary, including a command of all registers used by speakers of the source language.  Medical and community interpreters usually need only to master consecutive interpreting skills.

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TRANSLATORS	INTERPRETERS
<b>Translators must have good editing and revising skills, since they may be asked to adapt the text to the target readership.</b> For example, a client may request that a moderately technical document be translated so as to be understood by readers with only a limited education.	<b>Interpreters have an ethical duty to be faithful to the speaker's mode of expression.</b> That means they reproduce not only the message but also the speaker's register and style. This is especially important for court interpreters who must render their interpretation without additions, omissions or modifications of any kind.
<b>Translators must be able to analyze many different types of writing and refine their own work product.</b> It is not unusual for translators to go over a finished translation a dozen or so times to check content and structure, and to assure themselves that they have chosen the most suitable style and terminology for the translation. Terms and technical concepts may have to be thoroughly researched in monolingual and bilingual reference works and on the internet.	<b>Simultaneous interpreters must have analytic skills to grasp ideas and decode large chunks of meaning and reformulate them in the most concise form possible.</b> They must be well versed in synonyms so they can opt to use words with the fewest syllables to keep up with the speaker's pace. (Some languages, such as Spanish, have an expansion rate of 30%, i.e. it takes 30% more words than English to express the same meaning.)
<b>Translators translating into their acquired language must employ an editor to check for errors in grammar and usage.</b> Many overconfident practitioners omit this step but to do so is risky since errors and omissions may lead to lawsuits.	<b>Interpreters must self-monitor their performance.</b> In lengthy or complex interpreting assignments, they benefit from the presence of a team partner who can help with terminology and correction of any errors.

**CREDENTIALS, TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

<p><b>Available Translator Credentials:</b></p> <p><b>The most sought-after credential is certification by the American Translators Association (ATA)</b> (see <a href="http://www.atanet.org">www.atanet.org</a>), <b>available in many language combinations.</b> There are also Translation Certificates offered by educational institutions after candidates have completed a certain course of study and exams.</p> <p><b>Translation degree programs are available at some universities</b> (see below). It is important for translators to have some kind of credential. Although users of translation services often know little about how to choose an appropriate translator, certification or a degree provides some assurance of competence.</p> <p>An advantage of ATA certification is that candidates don't have to take and pay for a course (as with the college certificates), but ATA-certified translators must maintain membership in ATA or lose the credential.</p> <p><b>Certification in other countries:</b> The Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council (CTTIC) has a certification similar to ATA's (see <a href="http://www.cttic.org">www.cttic.org</a>); and many other foreign countries have their own certification systems.</p>	<p><b>Available Interpreter Credentials:</b></p> <p><b>Court interpreters: federal court certification</b> is available in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Navajo only (see <a href="http://www.ncsconline.org/fcice">www.ncsconline.org/fcice</a>). <b>NAJIT certification</b> (see <a href="http://www.najit.org">www.najit.org</a>) is accepted by some states. <b>State court certification</b> is offered in states that have developed their own certification exams or participate in the National Center for State Courts' consortium for state court interpreter certification, which has exams in a variety of languages.</p> <p><b>Conference interpreters:</b> Credentials or degrees in conference interpreting are offered by some universities and foreign T&amp;I organizations. See website for international conference interpreters association: <a href="http://www.aiic.net/schools/">www.aiic.net/schools/</a>.</p> <p><b>Medical interpreters:</b> To date, only Oregon and Washington state have certification for medical interpreters. Some private training courses offer certificates of proficiency. See <a href="http://www.ncihc.org/">www.ncihc.org/</a></p> <p><b>Community and telephone interpreting:</b> No certification exists. Certificates are sometimes offered by T&amp;I and community agencies; these are not true "certifications" but may at least show some degree of training.</p>
<p><b>Translators are certified separately in each direction of their language combination.</b> For example, there are separate exams and certifications for translating from language A to B, and from B to A. Most translators translate only into their native language(s).</p>	<p><b>Interpreters are certified in both directions at the same time.</b> Most certification exams consist of two separate exams, one written and one oral. Written exams may test proficiency only in English (as in state court exams) or in both languages (as for Federal, NAJIT and conference interpreting exams). Oral exams test interpreting skills into and out of both languages.</p>
<p><b>Certification is desirable but not required by all clients.</b> However, a valid and nationally recognized credential gives the translator an edge in the marketplace, and helps with potential clients who don't know how to evaluate a translator's skills. T&amp;I associations often have directories where potential clients can look up a translator's credentials and obtain contact information.</p>	<p><b>Certification is required by law or local rules in some state courts and in all federal courts. It is not required by law for conference, medical and community interpreting (Oregon and Washington state excepted).</b> Nevertheless, having a valid credential is a sign of competence and being on a roster of certified interpreters can provide a source of work in other interpreting settings.</p>

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TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS *continued*

TRANSLATORS	INTERPRETERS
<p><b>Translation degrees and courses are offered at a few universities.</b> The ATA has a publication listing university-level study programs and other training sources — see the ATA website (<a href="http://www.atanet.org">www.atanet.org</a>). Some information and links are also available on the NCSC and NAJIT websites.</p>	<p><b>Interpreter training is offered at few universities.</b> Consult the NAJIT website <a href="http://www.najit.org">www.najit.org</a> and the NCSC web site <a href="http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourtInterp.html">www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourtInterp.html</a> for links. See also websites of local and state T&amp;I associations.</p>
<p><b>Translators can benefit from university training in a foreign language but general language knowledge is not a guarantee that a person knows how to translate.</b></p> <p>The ideal training program includes an apprenticeship or mentoring situation with a translator or a translation bureau that is willing to provide correction and style editing.</p>	<p><b>Interpreters have limited training opportunities available through university programs or the private sector.</b> Some materials are available for self-training. Interpreting skills are developed and refined through practice and memorization of terminology. Interpreters need to practice skills daily and constantly refine comprehension by exposure to language in all its forms.</p>
<p><b>Translators can increasingly take advantage of distance learning courses, with professional evaluation of their work.</b> Translators can also find professional development courses and conferences through ATA and local T&amp;I groups.</p>	<p><b>Interpreters must be physically present at their training courses, so they cannot generally use distance learning methods.</b> They can find professional development courses and conferences through NAJIT, SSTI, local T&amp;I groups, continuing education programs, private training companies, and local healthcare groups or community services groups.</p>

**PHYSICAL AND PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS:**

<p><b>Translators must be able to spend long periods reading and typing.</b> Translators mostly work at their computers. Accommodations for visual, auditory and physical handicaps are generally available in this setting. They need adequate rest and recreation periods. Translation is mentally taxing and most translators set a maximum number of pages or words they can process per day.</p>	<p><b>Interpreters must have excellent hearing, voice control, memory retention, multitasking ability and stamina.</b> Simultaneous interpreting requires the ability to listen and speak at the same time. Consecutive interpreting requires superior short-term memory. Interpreting is a performing art, like music or athletics. Interpreters generally do not work for extended periods without relief. Loss of hearing can seriously affect an interpreter’s ability to earn a living.</p>
<p><b>Translators enjoy working alone and have confidence in their work, even when they don’t receive any feedback from their clients.</b> Once the product is delivered to the client, a translator may not hear anything more about it, good or bad. Translators sometimes agonize about the perfect translation. People who have a great need for praise or frequent input from others will not thrive in this profession.</p>	<p><b>Interpreters have to withstand the pressure of being in the public eye.</b> They enjoy performing and can amend word choices when challenged. They must become thick-skinned about unfounded criticism but remain flexible about learning from others and accepting correction when warranted.</p>
<p><b>Translators must accurately evaluate their limitations and refuse jobs that are beyond their abilities or time constraints.</b> Translators can generally review material beforehand in order to decide whether they can accomplish the task competently in the time allotted.</p>	<p><b>Interpreters must refuse assignments they know are beyond their skills, but do not always have sufficient prior information to assess the level of difficulty.</b> While working, they must actively report impediments to their performance (fatigue, lack of adequate preparation or skills, bad conditions) and they must be willing to admit mistakes and correct themselves, out loud, in public.</p>

**WORKING CONDITIONS:**

<p><b>Freelance translators can set their own schedules.</b> As long as the deadline is met, they can work nights or weekends or whenever they choose.</p>	<p><b>Freelance interpreters must be available when client needs service, usually during regular business hours.</b> They can accept or refuse work, but when they make a commitment, they have to appear as scheduled or find an acceptable replacement.</p>
<p><b>Freelance translators can work wherever they choose and don’t have to leave home if they don’t want to.</b> Most have home offices and can create a personalized working environment. No commuting necessary, unless to meet with client personally. Because increasingly translation work is sent and received by fax and email, a translator can work pretty much anywhere he or she has a computer, fax line and internet access.</p>	<p><b>Freelance interpreters must travel to the work site, often out of town and sometimes for long periods.</b> Community and medical interpreters usually work locally but may have several assignments in one day in different locations. Some courts and business locations present challenges because of poor acoustic conditions. Conference interpreters usually work in soundproof booths with audio feeds, an ideal environment.</p>

TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS *continued*

TRANSLATORS	INTERPRETERS
<b>Translators are mostly invisible – they don't have to invest money in professional attire or their appearance.</b> They can do a perfectly good translation in their pajamas if they choose.	<b>Interpreters are on display when working (except over the telephone).</b> Professional demeanor includes professional attire and refraining from displaying emotion or expressing opinions about what is heard and seen.
<b>Translators can be loners or hermits.</b> Except for infrequent communications with clients (usually by telephone or email), they have little obligation to mingle with other people. A shy or retiring personality is not a problem and may be an advantage.	<b>Interpreters need to be more outgoing and use social skills to interact with clients and collaborate with colleagues.</b> Since interpreters often work in tandem with other interpreters, they have to work effectively with team members and share resources and knowledge.
<b>Translators have time to perfect their work product.</b> Translators can look up words in a variety of dictionaries, do research while they are working, cogitate over the best formulation of a concept and modify drafts many times before settling on a finished product. They may use computer software, translation memory programs or other term management tools to assist their efforts.	<b>Interpreters have to produce a good work product immediately.</b> They must be able to grasp concepts in the source language instantaneously and re-formulate them quickly in the target language. They must have a vast vocabulary and do research and/or glossary building before each assignment.
<b>Translators are usually paid by the word.</b> Charges may range from 7 cents or below to 35 or more cents per word, depending on technical difficulty and language combination. Clients often don't know how to gauge technical difficulty (they all think their own jargon is easy!) so translators must know their market and how to negotiate. Many people think that translation is easily done by any bilingual individual. T&I professionals frequently need to educate clients.	<b>Interpreters are paid by the hour or by days and half days. Travel expenses, mileage and travel time are often also covered.</b> Fees vary, depending on language combination, specialization and length and complexity of the assignment. Long assignments require at least two interpreters because of the fatigue factor (see relevant article at <a href="http://www.najit.org/proteus/back_issues/vidal2.htm">www.najit.org/proteus/back_issues/vidal2.htm</a> ), but many clients are unaware and must be educated.
<b>Translators usually can set their own rates</b> (within what the market will bear). Pricing is always a problem for beginners so to join a professional association and benefit from others' experience.	<b>Interpreters are often limited to rates set by state or governmental agencies,</b> and those rates tend to affect the expectations of clients in the private sector. The interpreter must know market and set prices accordingly.
<b>Translators may have to compete with native speakers of their chosen language in other countries</b> (there is cheaper labor in economically challenged countries where U.S. dollars are prized).	<b>Interpreters usually compete with other locally available interpreters.</b> Some who work nationally or abroad may compete on a national level or with foreign colleagues. Even with a limited pool of candidates, interpreter competition can be intense.
<b>Translators have more civil liability</b> since their product is a physical object subject to scrutiny. Poor work or translations with significant errors can make a translator vulnerable to civil lawsuits. Translators are well advised to have special "Errors and Omissions" insurance for this reason.	<b>Interpreters have less liability but sometimes run other risks.</b> Since the product is fleeting (unless recorded), there is less scrutiny and fewer chances of challenges over time. However, for interpreters in the medical and legal fields, errors can have grave consequences. Interpreters' careers rest on their expertise. Significant errors can ruin a reputation. Knowledge of ethical parameters and protocols is a must.
<b>Translators must have office equipment, including computer(s), fax and email, copy machine, file cabinets, an extensive library of specialized dictionaries, computer-aided translation or terminology software, and so on.</b> Since translators work with written documents they need a suitable, quiet office space in which to work, do research and store reference works and previous projects. Many clients may require that they use certain translation/terminology software so that the product meets certain compatibility specifications. Translators sometimes hire administrative or secretarial help.	<b>Interpreters need mobile communication and scheduling devices (cellphone, PDA), as well as easy-to-carry research materials (specialized dictionaries, preferably installed on a laptop computer); they may also need their own simultaneous interpreting equipment (FM or infrared).</b> Interpreters market their availability, so they must have a way for clients to contact them even while away on other assignments.

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