BEING A TRANSLATOR/INTERPRETER

Alina VÎLCEANU
"Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Tg-Jiu

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to give general information about who and what are the translator and interpreter. There are details about the differences between the two of them. Most of the people already know that a translator converts meaning from one language to another and that the translator is the one who translates in writing and the interpreter is the one who does it orally. But few of the people know which the real differences between them are, how they are trained, what skills they are learned to develop in general. I have also chosen to talk about misconceptions regarding the translation profession. People tend to think that if they are able to speak and write a foreign language, they can become translators and if there is a dictionary, the translation is almost finished. Translation implies much more than translating words from a language with words from another language. It implies linguistic, cultural, and specialized knowledge.*

Keywords: *translation, source language, target language.*

A translator is a combination of writer and linguist, a person who takes written material such as newspaper or magazine articles, books, manuals or documents in one language and converts it into the equivalent in another language. In other words, a translator knows two languages fluently, and often knows a third or even a fourth. Translators also must have strong reading and writing skills, as well as a deep knowledge of the subject material they are working on.

Translators typically work into their native language, that is to say that they translate material that is in their second, acquired language into the language they were born into. There are exceptions, especially among people who are born and raised bilingually, but in general translators produce their best work when going into their mother tongue.

In the profession of translation, the translator's native language is referred to as the "A language," and the non-native languages as a "B language" or "C language". AB language is one which the translator can speak, read, and write virtually as a native speaker does. AC language is one which the translator can read and understand almost like a native, but does not necessarily speak or write so well. Obviously we all have an A language, and equally evident, all translators have a B language. Many translators have more than one B language, and some also have C languages.

A good translator is by definition bilingual. The opposite is not necessarily true, however. A born bilingual will still need two things to become a translator: first, the skills and experience necessary for translation; second, knowledge of the field in which he will translate. The skills and experience for translation include the ability to write well in the language the translator is working into, what is commonly called the *target language*, and the ability to read and understand the language being translated, what is known as the *source language*. Further, the bilingual who would be a translator must be able to work with the latest word processing software, machine-assisted translation tools, and typical Internet and email applications.

The knowledge of the field the translator is working in is often overlooked by translators and those who hire them. Translators are language professionals, but they

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)

also have to cultivate knowledge of the areas they work in. Few translators claim to be able to translate anything written in their languages, which would imply that they are experts on everything. A translator who says he can translate anything presents no credibility for everyone, as he claims to be capable of translating in every field but, in fact he does not master any. Clients and employers will not feel confident working with such a translator so, most translators have to specialize, working with one or a few related categories of material, for instance legal, financial, medical, computers, or electrical engineering, to name a few. Each field has its own vocabulary, syntax, and style and the translator has to work hard to develop the knowledge necessary to deal with such material.

The knowledge also includes two other important factors. First, the translator should have the background knowledge to work in the field. This does not mean that a medical translator should have Medicine Diploma, or that a translator of software manuals should be a programmer. But some background, experience, or education is essential. This can be obtained through coursework, on-the-job experience, or self-study. No one seems too concerned with exactly how translators develop their subject knowledge, unless that knowledge is very exotic.

Second, the translator should have the necessary resources to deal with the material. This means dictionaries, glossaries, and any other terminology, language, or subject matter resources. Such resources can include Web sites devoted to translation or terminology, discussion groups concerning translation, friends or colleagues who work in the profession, and magazines and journals. And translators have to work tirelessly to improve their knowledge of the fields they work in by reading related material. They also have to invest the time and money in maintaining their reference library and taking courses or acquiring good textbooks.

In other words, professional translators are always learning. Becoming a translator is a lengthy process, and being a translator is also a process, not a state. Anyone of us can acquire a language in a few weeks or months from a book and then begin translating.

But, at what point does someone know when he is ready to begin translating? The answer would not be so difficult. Specialists consider that everyone can start his career in translations when his abilities of expression and comprehension in the A and B languages are strong enough that he can do the job properly by the client's deadline. The length of time to cultivate these abilities depends on the person and the language. English native speakers can learn easier Germanic languages because their grammar, syntax, and vocabulary are relatively familiar. But, a language like Chinese or Japanese takes a longer period of time simply because there are thousands of characters that one should learn how to read, as well as deal with grammar, syntax, and structure totally different from what is found in English.

Translators are considered language professionals. They are linguists, even experts in intercultural communication and diplomats. If we try to explain all these appreciations we could say that:

- as linguists translators are capable of analyzing the syntax and structures of their languages, researching terminology and dealing with all new developments in their languages.

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)

- as intercultural communication experts and diplomats, translators have to be sensitive to the cultural and social differences which exist in their languages and be capable of addressing these issues when translating.

The above mentioned ideas are just a few characteristics of a good translator. They are also competent writers and good socio-analysts. But this is the ideal translator. Not all translators have all these qualities, and they do not need all of them. They should, however, have them in sufficient measure to be able to translate their material in a manner acceptable to their clients.

Translator vs. Interpreter

For some reason, most people refer to both translation and interpretation as "translation." Although translation and interpretation share the common goal of taking information that is available in one language and converting it to another, they are in fact two separate processes. So, we should outline first the difference between translation and interpretation. It is very simple:

- Translation is written - it involves taking a written text and translating it into the target language.
- Interpretation is oral - it refers to listening to somebody/something spoken and interpreting it orally into the target language.

These two processes differ mainly in their presentation, duration and the subject matter. In other words while interpretation involves instantaneous verbal transformation of communication on general subjects, translation involves a delayed transformation of written communication on subjects including highly specialized ones. This might seem like a subtle distinction, but if we consider our own language skills, we will find that our abilities to read/write and listen/ speak are not identical - we are probably more skilled at one pair or the other. So *translators* are excellent writers, while *interpreters* have superior oral communication skills. In addition, spoken language is quite different from written, which adds a further dimension to the distinction. Moreover, if we try to decode the word “translate”, we will probably think about transposing something from the original language into the target one. And if we do the same thing with the word “interpret”, we will think about the interpretation of the text, which sometimes means even including our own words in order to find the best way to express the main idea.

Translation and interpretation require the ability to accurately express information in the target language. Word for word translation is neither accurate nor desirable and a good translator/interpreter knows how to express the source text or speech so that it sounds natural in the target language. The best translation is one that you do not realize is a translation, because it sounds just like if it had been written in the target language. Translators and interpreters nearly always work into their native language, because in this way he can find the best translation, and can improve whatever word which may sound incorrect. Anyway, it is much easier to find the mistakes in your native language, than in the target one.

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)

A distinction is made between *translation*, which is the transferring from one language to another of ideas that are expressed in writing, and *interpreting* which is the transferring of ideas orally expressed.

Interpretation may be performed in two modes: consecutive and simultaneous. In consecutive interpretation, during formal negotiations, the interpreter usually sits with conference delegates while a speech is being made, listens to the speech, and takes notes. When the speaker pauses or finishes, the interpreter re-tells the speech in the first person, but this time, in the target language. Speech and interpretation occur in segments no longer than 10-15 minutes and generally two or more interpreters share the duties.

It is also the case when during consecutive interpreting the speaker stops every 1-5 minutes (usually at the end of every "paragraph" or a complete thought) and the interpreter then translates what was said into the target language. A key skill involved in consecutive interpreting is note taking, since few interpreters can memorize a full paragraph at a time without loss of detail. But interpreter's notes are very different from those of a stenographer, because writing down words in the source language makes interpreter's job harder when he has to translate the speech into the target language. Many professional interpreters develop their own system of signs, which allows them to take down not the words, but the thoughts of the speaker.

Strictly speaking, "simultaneous" is a wrongly used concept: the interpreter can't start interpreting until he understands the general meaning of the sentence. Depending on how far in the sentence the subject and the verb are located, the interpreter may not be able to utter a single word until he hears the end of the sentence in the source language. One of the key skills of the simultaneous interpreter is decisiveness: there is simply no time to recall the right idiom in the target language. Any delay mean missing a few words, even a thought that the speaker uttered.

On the surface, the difference between interpreting and translation is only the difference in the medium: the interpreter translates orally, while a translator interprets written text. But, the practice of each profession differs in the same way that written language differs from spoken. Thus, both translation and interpretation involve careful analysis of meaning in context and attention to extra-linguistic aspects of communication. The skills required for these two activities are quite different. Translators and interpreters are trained in entirely different manners. Translators receive extensive practice with representative texts in various subject areas and learn to manage glossaries of relevant terminology. On the other hand, interpreters should demonstrate excellent note-taking technique when interpreting. Interpreters must be good public speakers who can solve complex linguistic problems quickly, whereas translators must be able to conduct thorough and meticulous research and produce accurate documents while respecting tight deadlines. Interpreters are expected to be about 70% accurate; that is to say that interpretation is an approximate version of the original. Translations should be over 99% accurate, by contrast.

In spite of the differences in the skills of translators and interpreters, there is one thing that they must share, besides deep knowledge of both languages: they must understand the subject matter of the text or speech they are translating. In fact, the main qualifications of a good translator or interpreter include knowledge of the general subject of the discussions that must be interpreted. The translator should demonstrate general erudition and intimate familiarity with both cultures of the source and target

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)

language. An extensive vocabulary in both languages is required as well as the ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages.

Translation is not just a matter of substituting words in one language for words in another. It is a matter of understanding the thought expressed in one language and then explaining it using the resources of another language. In other words, a translator changes words into meaning, and then changes meaning back into words of a different language. So translating is basically paraphrasing. And if the translator does not fully understand one thought, then he cannot translate or interpret anything. Another important idea is that of being aware of the matter that is being discussed. This is why making sure the translator is knowledgeable in the subject matter of the meeting or the negotiation for which the person is interpreting is just as important as making sure that he is an experienced interpreter. Another common aspect, and the most important one, of translator and interpreter is decoding the meaning of the source text and re-encoding this meaning in the target language.

All in all, the translator and the interpreter have common and different abilities: different abilities because they are trained in different manners, in order to develop those particular skills required by their profession; common abilities because they are all linguistic professionals, experts in intercultural communication.

Misconceptions

One language cannot express the meanings of another. Instead, there is a distinction between the meanings built in and the meanings that must be captured and expressed. In this sense, different languages predispose their speakers to think differently and direct their attention to different aspects of the environment. Translation is therefore not simply a matter of seeking other words with similar meaning but of finding appropriate ways of saying things in another language. Different languages, then, may use different linguistic forms. But these forms are only one of the aspects of the difference between the two language systems. Although the general tendency is to consider translation as something that anybody can do with the help of an adequate dictionary, the fact is that producing a written text using another text as a basis is a much more complex phenomenon than what is commonly believed.

Many people who are not part of translation field, or have never tried to translate something tend to think translation is easy. You just need a dictionary and translate. It is not like this at all! Translation is, in fact, often arduous work. A translator must be simultaneously immersed in two different texts: the source text and the target text. This means being immersed in two different languages and two different cultures at one time. A translator must not only understand the source text, but must make that text understandable to people with a completely different linguistic and cultural background. On a more subtle level, a translator must recognize the register of the source text, and must be able to preserve that register in the target text - that means being continuously aware of the tone, vocabulary, and intention of a text. Only a professional translator has the necessary experience to undertake this sort of task.

Another misconception is that if one knows a bit of a language, he is capable of becoming a translator. It takes much more than just the knowledge of a foreign language to be a good translator. It is true that the first and the most important condition is to master the target language as well as possible, but we should not forget about the native

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)

language. Many people would consider this remark not a very good one, but this is a serious matter. If one does not truly understand his own language, he cannot begin to understand a foreign language.

But even being bilingual is not a guarantee that one can be a good translator. He must also be an excellent writer. If he cannot express himself well in writing, he certainly will not be able to produce a coherent translation. In addition, he must be kind of anthropologist. Language is based on culture and society. If one does not understand the culture behind the language which he is translating, he will never be able to translate the language correctly. And, of course, if he is not continuously aware of the culture behind the language into which he is translating, his translation will not be understood by its intended audience.

Translators believe in the necessity of giving translation the importance it deserves, rather than considering it a mechanical process that can be carried out with the help of a dictionary alone. It is a much more complex and interesting activity, which involves going beyond simply linking a series of words to produce a translation that is correctly understood by the target audience unfamiliar with the source language. The skills and experience for translation include the ability to write and read very well in the language the translator is working into. Even complying with these essential requirements does not mean that one can be a good translator. Indeed, translators are by definition language professionals, but they also have to cultivate knowledge of the areas they work in. There should be at least a minimum background in the working field. Experience, good translating skills, competitive fees are simply no longer enough to meet the many requirements translators are now faced with and to ensure a sufficient material to work on for a long period of time. In fact, the rules of the game have changed, and a good command of bluffing techniques is not enough. Professional translators should be always learning. Becoming a translator is a lengthy process, and being a translator is also a process, not a state.

Bibliography

Bassnett S., *Translation Studies* , London, 2002
Campbell, S., Translation *into the Second Language,* Harlow, Essex, 1998
Lefevere A. *Translation - History, Culture: A Sourcebook,* Routledge, New York, 1992
Sofer, M., *The Translator's Handbook* (2nd ed). Rockville, Maryland, 1998
Torop P., *Total Translation*, B. Osimo. Modena, 2000.

BDD-A5634 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:46 UTC)