TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION
An intercultural communication profession

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PART I

WHAT IS TRANSLATION? WHAT IS INTERPRETATION?
WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM?

What is generally understood as translation or interpretation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text or speech into the target language (TL).

In a nutshell, when we translate we are transporting words, sentences, or text (message) from one language into another in WRITING whereas when we do this ORALLY, we are interpreting. However, in reality we do not transport words, sentences or text, but ideas. Translators and interpreters must convey the ideas, that is, the meaning of the original (text or speech) in an accurate, complete, grammatical, idiomatic, and clear way.

Professional translation and interpretation are acts of communication.

“Translators are unassuming artisans of communication.” (Jean Francois Joly, President of FIT, Montreal, 1996)

Some authors recognize the value of translators and interpreters and understand that they are important links in the intercultural communication across languages. Communication and quality are paramount in the translator’s and interpreter’s performance.

“Translators live off the differences between languages, all the while working toward eliminating them.” (Edmond Cary 1956: 181)

For many people there is no clear distinction between interpretation and translation. At best, the term “translation” is used indiscriminately to mean transferring written or spoken words from one language into another, although translation and interpretation do perform essentially the same function, that is, they reexpress in one language what has been expressed in another. Many people believe that if you speak two languages you can perform a translation and perhaps even an interpretation job. These basic faux assumptions form the basis of a series of
misconceptions about the very ancient and respectable art and science of translation and interpretation. In fact, translators and interpreters are quite often regarded as some sort of “magicians” of the tongues by those who, in awe, watch them perform. Others see them as a sort of human machine capable of mechanically transporting the message from one language into another.

Professional translation is aimed at a Receiver (a user --reader or listener) who is interested in the message, and is done on request and for a financial compensation. The client --a person, a company, or an organization—who orders the translation or interpretation job pays for it. In professional interpretation the Sender (the speaker) generally speaks either to the target-language listeners only, or to both source-language listeners and target-language listeners. In interpreting, the parties concerned are not always aware of the communication situation, including possible difficulties associated with the interlingual and sometimes intercultural transfer.

Many scholarly essays have been written on these topics, yet there is a great need to educate the general public and explain the basics in simple terms. In today’s world, there is a growing awareness of cultural and language differences and, therefore, appreciation of the translators’ and interpreters’ work.

The fact is that, throughout history, translators have left their mark in civilization in many different ways. Their contributions range from creating alphabets, enriching languages, and encouraging the emergence of national literatures, to disseminating technical and scientific knowledge, propagating religions, not to mention writing dictionaries. (Delisle and Woodsworth, Translators through History, Philadelphia 1995)

**Modes of translation and interpretation**

There is no mystery to a written translation assignment: it is hard work --although many people think it is simply a matter of typing in another language. The translator, in addition to having excellent, native and near-native command of the languages involved, must have other important skills, such as analytical and research skills, as well as cultural expertise. Depending on the project, a translator may be asked to perform different tasks, such as précis writing and subtitling.

**Translation** involves the transfer of meaning contained in one set of language signs into another set of language signs through competent use of the dictionary and grammar, but it also involves a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria.

There are different types of translation:

1. **Intralingual** translation, or rewording (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language). [We can also call this paraphrasing.]
2. **Interlingual** translation or translation proper (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language). This is the process of transfer from source language (SL) to target language (TL).
(3) **Intersemiotic** translation or *transmutation* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems).
(Bassnet-McGuire, 1991)

Some authors believe that “translation belongs most properly to *semiotics*, the science that studies sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions.” (Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London 1977)

**What is sight translation?**

Sometimes a translator is asked to read/render aloud the source written text in the target language. That is called **sight translation**. For this, in addition to all the linguistic and analytical, and cultural skills the translator must have good **public speaking** skills. He/she must deliver the message with poise, eye contact, good pace, good voice, good accent ... and must **translate** accurately, **on the spot** --no time to check anything in the dictionary. When receiving the message, the user depends entirely on the translator as he/she renders it aloud from the original source as if it were read in the target language.

**Sight translation** is considered a **bridge** between the **written** and the **spoken**, between translation and interpretation.

Sight translation is a skill used in several professional situations. Court interpreters are often called to perform sight translation. Sometimes simultaneous interpreters also apply this skill in the booth when they have been provided the document that the speaker will be reading or quoting from.

Particularly with the new voice and speech recognition technologies, it is essential that translators have good sight translation skills because they can be more efficient, save time and money by dictating into the computer microphone and editing the job later.

**Interpretation** can be performed in two basic modes: **consecutive** and **simultaneous**.

In **consecutive interpretation**, the speaker gives a speech and then pauses for the interpreter to render it in the target language. While listening attentively to the speaker, the interpreter takes notes and must give back the speech without any meaning errors, omissions or shifts. The interpreter must have excellent public speaking skills. The interpretation must be delivered at a good pace and must convey and capture the tone and spirit of the original speech.

Training for consecutive interpretation is very important. It involves developing special listening, memory and analytical skills, note-taking techniques as well as public speaking skills. This mode of interpretation is used at high-level and smaller meetings, as well as in after-dinner speeches and escorting situations. Occasionally, in the diplomatic world or in negotiations the notes taken by the interpreter have helped the delegations in drafting the proceedings. It is also used in court interpreting at the witness stand.
Simultaneous interpretation is the rendition of a speech in the target language performed as the speaker is speaking (in real time) in the source language. It is usually done using special interpretation equipment. In a conference situation, the interpreters are seated in a soundproof booth, usually set up in the back of the meeting room from where they have a view of the podium and the speaker. The interpreters have the sound of the speaker’s (floor) microphone fed into their ears and their interpretation is, in turn, broadcast into the audience’s headsets. Some conferences have attendants from different parts of the world and, therefore, have different language booths, so their audience can follow the interpretation in the language of their preference (French, Spanish, Russian, Korean, etc.) The meetings held by the United Nations Organization, the European Parliament, Organization of American States, FAO, WHO, and other international organizations are interpreted into their different official languages. Most of these organizations have staff interpreters but they also hire professional free-lance conference interpreters.

Training for simultaneous interpretation is challenging and intense. It requires a good consecutive interpretation background and special training for stamina, mental reflexes, voice, on the spot problem solving, dealing with foreign accents, speed as well as other special techniques.

What are some of the challenges…

Because of the stress and high level of concentration involved, conference interpreters work in teams of two, and sometimes three, per booth. It is necessary for them to rotate, taking turns every 30-40 minutes. An interpreter’s workday should not exceed 6 hours. Working conditions are very important both for the quality of the interpretation delivered and for the health of the professional performing. Unless conditions are adequate for performing this kind of task, the interpreter cannot deliver total quality and/or suffers great stress. Adequate view and sound, ventilation and temperature in the booth, and space (booth size) are extremely important, not to mention the necessary breaks and meal periods. Some international standards have been developed especially for the conference interpretation profession.

Currently, as the world grows smaller and conference attendees come from all over the world, the number of working languages at international events has increased. Due to space constraints, conference organizers often place the interpreter booths in a room adjacent to the conference room. This presents additional challenges to the interpreters: it can hinder total quality interpretation since the monitors that are placed in front of the interpreter booths cannot really replace neither the panoramic view (podium, audience, entire stage, projection screen, etc.) nor the emotions and direct contact with conference participants, or the dynamics inside the meeting room.

Quality sound and sight are, thus, of paramount importance. Cases of “mishearings” by interpreters show the dangers of “misunderstanding” as well as the importance of working conditions (number of interpreters, quality of equipment) and the need for teamwork. It is also very important that interpreters be briefed as far as topic, type and purpose of meeting, and that they be given the appropriate reference materials and documents.
For seminars and small group meetings, users prefer to have simultaneous interpretation (vs. consecutive) for a more dynamic communication and often use portable whispering interpretation devices. These devices are convenient, easy to use, and less expensive. They are ideal for a tour, for example. However, because this set up does not provide the interpreter any direct feed of the floor sound into his or her ears, the interpreter must perform *a capella*. The interpreter whispers the interpretation into his/her microphone which is broadcast into the headsets of the participants. Often times the speaker’s voice does not carry or is projected away from the microphone or the interpreter does not have an adequate view of the speaker and cannot read the lips, facial expression or gestures of the people speaking. These drawbacks lead to “mishearings” and frustration on the part of the interpreter who is interested in delivering total quality interpretation.

Simultaneous interpretation is used in international conferences and in all international organizations. It is also used for interpretation in federal and state courts in several states of the Union, however, very few counties have outfitted their courtrooms with interpretation equipment.

**Inside the World of Translators and Interpreters**

If you ever find yourself surrounded by translators and interpreters you will hear them talk about language combination, or about an A, B, or C language. Language combination refers to the specific languages a person can speak or function in. For example, Spanish-English, French-Russian, Italian-Spanish-Portuguese, or Greek-English-French. So, depending on the languages you speak and the part of the world you live in, you may have an unusual (=scarce) or exotic language combination, for example, Chinese-Greek-Danish, or Polish-Spanish-Japanese.

The “A”, “B” or “C” category refers to the native or “A” language of the interpreter, the near-native or “B” language, or the passive or “C” language of the interpreter. The A and B languages are the active languages of the translator or interpreter, that is, the interpreter and translator can perform into and out of either language. A “C” means passive knowledge of that language, in other words, translator/interpreter can work out of it into his/her mother tongue but does not work into that language. While a person can have several B or C languages, and can add, upgrade or drop a language, few interpreters declare, professionally, two A languages.

In general, amongst interpreters true *bilingualism*, not to mention *trilingualism*, is rather rare, although there are cases of highly talented professionals who do have more than one native language, all equally strong.

Professional conference interpreters usually work into their native language, however, in diplomatic spheres and highly sensitive conferences there is a preference for sacrificing style in delivery rather than risking a meaning error due to faulty comprehension of the source language (nuances, shifts, undertones, accents and other elements) by the interpreter. In other words, this school of thought believes that the interpreter is much less likely to misunderstand a speech in his/her native language than in the foreign language, hence it is preferable that he/she work into his/her B language even at the expense of style.

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In Europe, in particular, bilingual booths are not favored, whereas in Asia and Latin America these are commonplace. *Bilingual booth* means that the interpreters work in both directions, that is, into their A and into their B language.

International conferences hire both professional conference translators and conference interpreters.

**Conference translation** is the work performed by a translator who is hired for a particular conference to translate official documents, speeches and other materials presented and produced at the conference. Conferences can be very large events, having several working languages, and may need several teams of translators hired especially for an event --sometimes in addition to their staff translators. Conference translators work in teams according to their language combinations, they also create style guides and specialized glossaries. Often the **Chief Translator** or **Project Director** is the link with the press room and the team of conference interpreters. What with fax machines, e-mail, and other forms of communication via Internet, conferences may even have translators on duty in a continent other than that of the event in order to have round the clock translation services and meet strict deadlines.

**Conference interpretation** is the work performed by an interpreter at any given event, be it a conference, a meeting, a convention, a parliament, or a congress. Although simultaneous interpretation is the preferred mode because it saves time and makes the meeting more dynamic and “seamless”, there may be instances where consecutive interpretation is requested at a particular event (for example, after-dinner speeches, break out groups, special negotiations, and dialogues.) Consecutive interpretation is useful, for example, in trade and business negotiations or very sensitive diplomatic missions because it affords the speakers some perspective on what has just been said or heard and thus have more time to think out their next speech. The **Chief Interpreter** can organize and coordinate teams of interpreters, workload, schedules, and also collects and distributes materials from speakers and --depending upon the size and complexity of the meeting-- is in general, the link between the client, speakers, interpreters, conference organizer, and/or hiring agency.

**Community interpretation**, also called *liaison interpreting*, is the work performed by thousands --trained and empirical— of interpreters in situations “small” and “large” and communities where there is a need for intercultural communication across languages. Their contribution to their communities and society, in general, is precious, yet many times not properly, if at all, (financially) rewarded. In immigrants’ communities it is not uncommon to see children serving many a times as interpreters for their parents or relatives. Quite often these children grow up to train formally and become conference interpreters as well.

Community interpreters handle all kinds of common everyday matters and topics, technical and general, legal, and medical. Community interpreters serve in different ways and places: at town hall meetings, neighborhood gatherings, government offices and agencies, large department stores, tourist information sites, religious services, and many other situations. An interesting element featured by community interpreters is “client advocacy”. There are over the
phone community interpreters who assist in conversations and dialogues between organizations, clients, users, consumers, and even in more sensitive situations, for example, with doctors and patients, and even courtrooms and law enforcement agencies. All these interpreters train for assisting the different client-organizations that subscribe to the services of telephone interpreting learning their specific vocabularies, and internal procedures.

Two distinct fields have developed out of community interpreting that have acquired a professional status. Medical interpreters work in major hospitals and at medical doctors’ offices assisting with patients, in operating rooms, even in tele-medicine events that are broadcast via satellite for teaching purposes, for example. Court Interpreters specialize in legal matters. They learn all about the law and legal systems of the states and the country, and train for working specifically in court --usually in criminal matters, at state and federal levels, and immigration courts-- or in law offices. Law enforcement agencies as well as other government agencies use professional, certified court interpreters for administrative hearings, proceedings, trials, arbitrations, for example, Worker’s Compensation Boards, Insurance Boards, Department of Labor, Social Security Administration, Employment Development Departments, among others.

Both medical and court interpreters train to deal with highly specialized vocabulary and in some states (for example, California) interpreters must pass special certification exams, written and oral, before they are allowed to work. Although the basic skills of interpreting are universal, accuracy, memory skills, and delivery, for both medical and legal interpreting are particularly important and involve training in specific interpreting techniques. There are also important and highly sensitive ethical issues that apply to these fields of interpretation.

Escort interpretation and seminar interpretation are categories created by the US Department of State (other than the conference interpretation category) for their large contingent of professionally trained interpreters who are hired as independent contractors to offer professional interpretation services on special assignments, missions, and training courses to visitors from all over the world. These interpreters are performing a diplomatic mission all the while interpreting for international delegates and visitors in different meetings, interviews, tours, and hospitality encounters on topics ranging from the environment and architecture to legal, political, copyright or health issues… These itinerant interpreters travel throughout the United States gaining exposure in different fields and accumulating over the years a wealth of expertise.

Some historical highlights of the translation and interpretation profession

For a sense of perspective, let us rewind time and trace some of the known origins of the translation profession. Translation has existed since time immemorial. Moreover, the history of translation is intertwined with the history of writing, and the truth is that translation permeates every aspect of society.

“If we stand back and assess the work of translators over the centuries, we can see that receiving cultures have generally considered themselves enriched by their work. Just think of

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Livius Andronicus, the Greek slave in the third century BC who introduced the stern Romans to the treasures of Greek literature; Ibn al-Muqaffa, the eighth-century Persian translator who enriched the Arab culture with the famous Indian Fables of Bidpai, which later inspired the fables of Jean de La Fontaine; Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), a translator before becoming an author, who brought the ballad, the romance, the fabliau and animal fables into his culture; Jagannatha, the eighteenth-century Indian astronomer who translated Ptolemy’s *Almagest* and Euclid’s *Elements* from Arabic into Sanskrit; Voltaire, who acquainted his compatriots with Shakespeare and shook their aesthetic values; Emilie du Chatelet who was the first to translate the seminal work of Newton into French; Yan Fu (1853-1921), who introduced the work of the great British thinkers Thomas Huxley, Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill to China; and finally, closer to home, Constance Garnett (1861-1946), the eminent English translator, who made the Anglo-Saxon world familiar with great Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and Turgenev. There are thousands and thousands of examples.” (Jean Francois Joly, 1995)

The earliest form of writing known to us is Sumerian cuneiform script. The Sumerian-Eblaite vocabularies (bilingual lists) inscribed in clay tablets uncovered by archaeologists are 4500 years old (Dalnoky, 1977). And with the emergence of the writing systems the art and science of translation was born. In ancient civilizations, scribes were the masters of writing, teaching, and translation. Invariably, writing was attributed to the gods or regarded as a divine gift. According to Egyptian mythology, Thoth, the God of knowledge, language and magic, invented writing. Thoth was also an adviser and scribe to the other gods. In fact, the word “hieroglyphs” means “sacred inscriptions”.

The Phoenicians invented their alphabet around 1000 BC, and merchants and navigators as they were, their alphabet spread to other peoples living on the shores of the Mediterranean. Other alphabets derived from the Phoenician are Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Coptic, and Arabic.

Translators played an important role in the creation of alphabets and writing. Although they also dealt with commercial contracts, law, and literature, translators have always had a connection to the sacred and religious teachings. Let us mention just a few important figures in the history of translation:

Ulfila, was a lector during religious services, and as part of his duties he studied the Bible which prepared him for his later work as a translator. He invented the Gothic alphabet, and then undertook a translation of the Bible from the Greek text into Gothic language.

In the fourth century, Mesrop Mashtots had a gift for languages: he spoke Greek, Persian, Syriac and Armenian. He became a monk, founded several monasteries. He invented the Armenian alphabet, which enabled him and his team of translators and disciples to undertake the translation of the Scriptures in order to preach in Armenian. There is reason to believe that Mesrop also created an alphabet for the Albanians and is also credited with the invention of the Georgian alphabet.

In Armenia the annual holiday *Tarkmanchats*, which means “the translators”, honors
translators, writers and teachers.

In the ninth century, after inventing a system of writing for the Moravians, the Glagolitic (glagol meaning “word” in Old Slavonic) alphabet, Cyril was able to carry out the work as a translator, missionary and diplomat. It is noteworthy that the first words translated using the new Glagolitic alphabet were: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” from the Gospel according to St. John.

Fast forwarding closer to our time, in 1840 we have another missionary-translator. Methodist minister James Evans needed a writing system to facilitate his work as evangelist and educator among the natives of western Canada. He learned Ojibway, transcribed it into Latin characters and began translating. He later developed the Cree syllabic alphabet which in time was adopted by many native communities and was even adapted for the language of the Inuit of the far North. This enabled the translation of several books of the Bible into Inuktitut in 1876. (Delisle, Translators through History, Philadelphia 1995)

As we have seen, translators have played a pivotal role in the development of national languages, emergence of national literatures, dissemination of knowledge, reins of power, spread of religions, transmission of cultural values, and in the writing of dictionaries.

In an ever-shrinking world, in the era of globalization, communication across cultures demands different language combinations and specially trained translation and interpretation professionals to assist in business, trade, science, and technology. Internet has brought about a revolution in communication across cultures: not only has it accelerated the evolution of languages and exchanges between cultures but has also incorporated those that were falling into oblivion, and new words are coined which in turn create new cultures.

As people become more world-oriented and feel greater need to have a presence in cyberspace in order to be competitive, the translation and interpretation profession is evolving rapidly. Translators and interpreters incorporate in their daily work the latest technologies: from optical character and speech recognition to translation memory and glossary-building software as well as digitalization technologies to preserve ancient manuscripts dating from the first centuries of our Common Era which are now on the endangered species list of mankind’s cultural heritage.

The spoken word does not leave a written record. It is therefore difficult to trace the exact history of interpretation. However, as early as 3000 BC the Egyptians had a hieroglyphic that signified “interpreting”. In some classical works several references to interpreters have been documented: ancient Greece and Rome or the Middle Ages. Interpretation was widely used for purposes of exchanging and spreading philosophies, ideas, and religion as well as for science, and diplomacy.

The Romans, for example, used interpreters in the administration of their conquered territories and in their campaigns on the frontiers of their far-flung empire (Van Hoof 1962).

All the major world religions have used interpreters. The Judeo-Christian world for their
missionary work or for interpretation from Hebrew into Aramaic, and vice versa. In Armenia, in the early centuries of Christianity, the Scriptures were initially taught in Greek and in Syriac, and therefore, interpretation was often required during religious services. Between the fifth century BC and the sixth century AD (and certainly into the tenth century), interpreters were working in Palestine and Babylonia, in courts as well as in Talmudic schools and academies. Often they worked with the rabbi under whom they had studied and whose thinking and teachings they knew well. Some also seem to have been what we would call freelance interpreters, called in for important occasions. Some interpreters were martyrs, others rabbis themselves, even lawmakers and what we call today teaching assistants. (Bowen, Kaufmann, Kurz, *Translators Through History*, Philadelphia 1995)

Later, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Crusades, trade, and diplomatic as well as religious missions to Africa, the Middle and the Far East made interpreting indispensable and caused interpreters to be more recognized. The Arabs mention the use of interpreters in their medieval literature.

During the Age of Discovery there were men and women who served as interpreters translating their languages and also their cultures for outsiders. Some were guides and scouts who worked, voluntarily or involuntarily, for soldiers and explorers. Others had careers as assistants to missionaries and as professional civil servants, while others worked as what anthropologists and linguists call “native informants”. They functioned as conduits through which information flowed between worlds in collision, translating more than just words and bringing comprehensibility to otherwise meaningless static. (Karttunen, *Between Worlds*, N.J., 1994)

In North America, one famous figure is Doña Marina (sixteenth-century Mexico), the Indian woman who spoke nahuatl and mayan, and Spanish. The chronicles of the time refer to her as the “interpreter” for Hernan Cortes, and Cortes himself referred to her in his communications with the king of Spain as “my interpreter, who is an Indian woman.” From historical documents we have also learned of chains of interpreters (relay interpretation) that were formed in order for the expeditionaries to communicate with natives who spoke other Indian languages. Doña Marina in particular was more than an interpreter, the fact is that having fallen in love with the conqueror she played an important role more than an interpreter and advocate, she was a strategist and an adviser to Cortes. She is also known as “Malinche” or “Malintzin” and is perceived by Mexicans as the ultimate “traitor”, the collaborator who betrayed the indigenous peoples of the New World to the Spaniards.

I suppose we could assume that the method of interpretation that predominated until the introduction of special equipment was consecutive interpretation –with or without notes--; however, we cannot discard the possibility that interpreters developed and used simultaneous (whispered) interpretation long before technology was incorporated. (Whispered interpreting is done by one interpreter for another individual to whom the translation is repeated in a whisper. Without a whispering equipment, this can only be done for the benefit of up to two listeners).

We have record of fine interpreters performing in consecutive interpretation during the
meetings of the League of Nations at the end of World War I. Consecutive interpretation skills were perfected by many highly skilled practitioners. Salvador de Madariaga, a historian, writer, diplomat, and chief of the Spanish delegation to the League of Nations, has documented some exciting moments in the profession. As far as the length of speech “intake” (longer, shorter segments) by the consecutive interpreter, in some instances of history, interpreters have been asked to provide a sentence by sentence rendition. In any case, mastery of mnemonic techniques are the key in this art.

In the era of the League of Nations, new solutions were sought. Special equipment for simultaneous interpreting, which allowed the interpreter to talk at the same time as the speaker by means of a system of earphones and microphones, was developed by IBM and introduced to the League of Nations by three Americans. The International Labour Office in Geneva was the only agency of the League of Nations that decided to adopt it. (The system was first put to use in 1927 in combination with consecutive interpreting). In 1935, at the 15th International Congress of Physiology in Leningrad, the inaugural address given by Professor Pavlov was simultaneously interpreted from Russian into French, English, and German. (Van Hoof 1962: 19-20)

Later on during the War Crimes Trial of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (November 1945 – October 1946) simultaneous interpretation was used and involved four languages. Only two interpreters, Edouard Roditi (1920-1992) and Haakon Chevalier (1902-1985) had previous simultaneous experience, and the team of interpreters had to handle a wide variety of subjects under difficult conditions.

The chief of interpreting and translation services in Nuremberg was Colonel Leon Dostert (1904-71), an American of French extraction with remarkable organizational abilities. Dostert recruited interpreters among students and teachers from the University of Geneva’s school of interpreting, along with people who had learned several languages in a multilingual family or through the vicissitudes of war. The technical system was perfected by a Canadian, an ex-RAF bomber pilot and audio engineer named Aurele Pilon, who had done research resulting in the invention of radar. He designed the complex network of wires linking microphones and earphones, which ultimately made simultaneous interpreting workable (Delisle 1990: 335)

By 1950, once equipment had been improved, simultaneous interpretation was fully accepted. Today it is widespread…

Part II

The process…

How is the message transferred to another language?

The communicative relationship in the process of translation shows that the translator/interpreter is receiver and emitter, the end and the beginning of two separate but linked chains of communication:

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Author → Text → Receiver = Translator → Text → Receiver

Here’s a brief description of the process of translation and interpretation:

Decoding and recoding

The translator/interpreter operates criteria that transcend the purely linguistic, and a process of decoding and recoding takes place. According to Eugene Nida’s model of the translation process these are the stages involved:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{SOURCE LANGUAGE} & \text{RECEPTOR LANGUAGE} \\
\hline
\text{TEXT} & \text{TRANSLATION} \\
\hline
\text{ANALYSIS} & \text{RESTRUCTURING} \\
\hline
\rightarrow & \rightarrow & \rightarrow & \\
\end{array}
\]

The translator first reads and understands the text in the original or “source” language and does a text analysis before undertaking the actual translation.

Research/preparation is an integral part of a translator/interpreter’s job since he/she must fully understand the content of the original in order to produce a good “target” text/speech.

One of the first writers to formulate a theory of translation was the French humanist Etienne Dolet (1509-46) who was tried and executed for heresy after ‘mistranslating’ one of Plato’s dialogues in such a way as to imply disbelief in immortality.

In 1540 Dolet published a short outline of translation principles, entitled “How to Translate Well from one Language into Another” and established five principles for the translator:

1. The translator must fully understand the sense and meaning of the original author, although he is at liberty to clarify obscurities.
2. The translator should have a perfect knowledge of both SL and TL.
3. The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings.
4. The translator should use forms of speech in common use.
5. The translator should choose and order words appropriately to produce the correct tone.

(Bassnett-McGuire, Translation studies, London 1991)

Word for word (dictionary) vs. meaning units

The translator is far more than a competent linguist, and translation involves both a scholarly and sensitive appraisal of the source language text and an awareness of the place the translation is intended to occupy in the target language system.
The great translator of Homer, George Chapman, states that a translator must

(1) avoid word for word renderings;
(2) attempt to reach the ‘spirit’ of the original;
(3) avoid overloose translations, by basing the translation on a sound scholarly investigation of other versions and glosses.

In the exercise of transporting text or speech, the translators and interpreters cannot merely search for equivalent words in the “target” language to render the meaning of the “source”. They work with meaning units. But there is much more to it because they must take into account the contexts --a world, a culture-- and with respect to comprehension, extra-linguistic knowledge plays a major role in both the comprehension phase and reformulation phase.

How do translators and interpreters acquire the necessary knowledge for their different assignments, which can range from political speeches to highly technical and scientific to trade issues?

To interpret or translate specialized texts or speeches in fields they are not thoroughly familiar with, interpreter and translator must prepare and research thoroughly. And even so, the interpreter, doesn’t have any guarantee of having acquired all the knowledge/information necessary to perform the work. Hence the stress of the job. This gives you an idea of the intensity of professional conference interpretation training programs. The interpreter acquires most of his/her knowledge before the performance at the conference, whereas the translator’s knowledge acquisition takes place during the translation work.

Both translators and interpreters require linguistic information, terminological information and stylistic information. The sources of information for knowledge acquisition are very diverse –printed, human, electronic. Ideal sources are the ones originally written in the target language, written by experts in the subject matter, up-to-date, as well as “parallel” texts (type of material, target audience, purpose, and context).

Professional translators and interpreters acquire a very wide extra-linguistic knowledge which accumulates over time in the course of their career. But let us not forget that in-depth cultural knowledge is also necessary. Professional translators and interpreters possess bicultural, multicultural “literacy”, a key element that cannot be acquired overnight or through books or crash courses of any kind. It is intrinsic and natural to them, often it is the result of 10+ years of living and studying in a foreign culture, or of having lived totally immersed in more than one cultural environments, or having grown up in an international setting where communication across languages was simply indispensable.

**Issues of untranslatability and interpretability**

Sometimes the translator finds structures in the source language that do not exist in the
target language. This problem can exist on the linguistic level when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the TL for an SL item. On the cultural level, an item may be untranslatable due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text.

An example of this are the different concepts of the term bathroom in an English, Finnish, or Japanese context, where both the object and the use made of that object are not at all alike. An even more complicated example is the translation of the term democracy. This is a term largely present in the lexis of many languages and, although it may be relatable to different political situations, the context will guide the reader to select the appropriate situational features. The problem here is that the reader will have a concept of the term based on his or her own cultural context, and will apply that particularized view accordingly. Hence, the difference between the adjective democratic as it appears in the following three phrases is fundamental to three totally different political concepts:

- the American Democratic Party
- the German Democratic Republic
- the democratic wing of the British Conservative Party.

So although the term is international, its usage in different contexts shows that there is no longer any common ground from which to select relevant situational features.

It is clearly the task of the translator to find a solution to even the most daunting of problems. Such solutions may vary enormously, and the translator must intuitively resolve the issue applying the solution that promises a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort, that is the MINIMAX STRATEGY. (Bassnett-McGuire, Translation studies, London 1991)

**Translator’s and Interpreter’s tools**

Translators use a variety of tools: reference materials, dictionaries (monolingual, bilingual, thesaurus, specialized glossaries, electronic versions, on-line databanks) as well as several sophisticated computer technologies available nowadays, such as translation memory and translation software for larger and more technical projects.

Translators have also made vast contributions to the creation of dictionaries, lexicons, encyclopaedic and other specialized works. Dictionaries are as old as writing itself. Sumerian tablets dating from 2600 BC are the oldest surviving nomenclatures and they not only served as unilingual dictionaries but also laid the foundation for a more complete dictionary of the language compiled around 2200 BC. Bilingual lexicography also originated with the Sumerians. Akkadian-Sumerian bilingualism developed after Akkadian supplanted the Sumerian language. As of 1900 BC, Sumerian scribes, who were already accustomed to drawing up lists of words in one language, as we have seen, began to add Akkadian translations to the Sumerian words. This is how bilingual dictionaries were born. A quadrilingual Sumerian-Akkadian-Hurrian-Ugaritic lexicon was found during archaeological digs at Ugarit.
Translators and interpreters have always been concerned with problems of lexicography. The Renaissance was the first golden age of multilingual dictionaries. Specialized dictionaries concentrate on a specific area of human knowledge. Unilingual works were the first to appear: we have two Greek medical glossaries from the first century as well as a couple of unilingual works in Arabic from the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Each century has seen the appearance of different kinds of works in a wide range of disciplines. For example, during the war years, most of the dictionaries produced were military ones. Later, there was a boom in all scientific and technological fields. International agencies such as the United Nations, and the World Health Organization, began publishing glossaries pertaining to their own spheres of activity.

With the advent of computers it became faster and easier to process lexical data and the world saw the creation of several databanks or termbanks. The terminology profession grew out of the profession of translator. The global village has brought along a technological revolution and the so-called Information Age or Age of Knowledge. The translator is a “knowledge” worker. The Information Technologies present the translator with highly sophisticated computerized tools to perform increasingly challenging tasks, such as multilingual projects that call for simultaneous translation, that is, requiring production of the translated identical version of the original in multiple languages as the original is being generated.

The medium...

Who is this communication bridge, intercultural communicator, processor, or conduit? Is this professional a sort of fiberoptic cable?

Can this person be replaced by a machine?

We have already mentioned that the translation and interpretation profession implies, literally, a lifetime of learning.

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. In order to be efficient a translator must not only know the languages but must primarily have cross-cultural awareness. This is particularly evident in certain fields, for example, in advertising, marketing, negotiations, and the business sector in general. Some items present special challenges because they are culture-specific. Advertisements produce and are themselves the result of cultural stereotyping. Translated advertisements import social values and often unrecognized beliefs, as well as linguistic patterns. Because of the fact that various aspects of advertisements are closely bound up with cultural phenomena, intercultural and not merely intertextual comparisons have to be made and appropriately considered in translation. (Jettmarova, Piotrowska, Zauberberga, Prague 1995)

There is no doubt that translators and interpreters help awaken the collective consciousness of ethno-linguistic groups and they also import new ideas and spiritual values. They contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and pave the way for cultural, social and spiritual progress.

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Thus translators have served as vital links in the transfer of knowledge between peoples separated by language and cultural barriers. Translators are, in fact, bridges between cultures, nations, races and continents that transcend time and space.

They have enabled certain central texts – works of science, philosophy or literature – to acquire universal stature. Translators breach the walls created by language differences, thereby opening up new horizons and broadening our vision of reality to encompass the entire world. (Delisle, Translators through History, 1995)

These educated men and women of letters have been distrusted, even called turncoats and traitors. But if we think about it, what people actually fear is not the translators themselves, but rather the new, foreign and sometimes strange values that they [translators] introduce into their own cultures. We are always somewhat unsettled by novelty, difference and otherness, which challenge our own values and hold up a mirror that forces us to examine ourselves. Translation, in the final analysis, is about discovery – a journey of exploration through the fabulous realm of knowledge. (Jean Francois Joly, 1995)

Alexander Pushkin said that the translator is the mailman of human civilization. History has not always been kind to translators, however, we could indeed study history through the translators whose daily work attests to the fact that translation permeates all facets of human activity and is an inexhaustible source of progress. (Jean Francois Joly, 1995)

Translators and interpreters possess a multiple track mind, they constantly go back and forth between languages and cultures. Very often they are third culture children, because they are born at a crossroad or because they are the result of a combination of cultures from their life experiences. When they are using one language and not the other their mind is actually reading that special “channel” in the brain where all that information and culture is stored and can thus… laugh in French, cry in French, pray in French, and make love in French OR add in Spanish, subtract in Spanish, and negotiate in Spanish.

Are you born a translator/interpreter? Can you train for it? Are there specialized schools? What goes into the training?

Yes, you are born a translator or interpreter but in order to be a good one you must like the activity, it must flow from within. ...And if you put your heart and soul in it, you can train for it as well so long as you have a full command of the languages and true understanding of the cultures involved.

I hesitate to affirm that training translators and interpreters is a rather recent development in history because of the many oral traditions throughout history and across very highly developed civilizations on this planet of which we still know very little. Perhaps what is fair to say is that in the age of annihilators of space and time, we are availing ourselves of technologies that enable us to prepare excellent professionals and enhance the standards of this ancient
activity.

In the earlier part of the 20th century, interpreters in the West learned how to interpret on the job, by trial and error. Slowly important universities around the world have created training programs distinguishing them from language and literature or applied linguistics. In the global village, communication between cultures has become increasingly important and language combinations have multiplied, largely due to the regional trade blocks that have and continue to emerge.

PART III

The Profession…

The service or product to be delivered or the kind of translation or interpretation to be provided depends upon who the audience is and what the purpose of the piece of communication is.

**Why hire a professional?**

The globalization of trade in the twentieth century has contributed to more demand of professional services. World War II triggered a political upheaval which led to further developments in bilingual lexicography and unheard of language combinations. The political polarization of the world brought the satellite nations’ languages to the forefront. Empires had to abate language and cultural barriers and needed intercultural experts for communication between various communities. Immigrant workers’ presence also brings about linguistic and communication challenges.

The internationalization of political, economic, scientific and cultural relations have increased the demand for translators and enhanced their status…

When companies invest enormous amounts in infrastructure and setting up affiliates, branches or subsidiaries in order to do business in other countries, they simply cannot afford failure due to lack of professional translation and interpretation services. The stakes are too high. You cannot entrust your organization’s livelihood and, therefore, success in the global arena to a non-professional. This is why T&I professionals promote intercultural awareness and are constantly educating their clients and the public in general.

Another important concept is the “added value” delivered by the professional interpreter or translator. He/she is capable of transferring a concept into another culture, whose interpretation or translation does not merely translate word for word but is able to express and incorporate the cultural concepts in delivering the message. The baggage of knowledge, experience, and cultural expertise, as well as intuition and adaptation abilities is priceless and makes all the difference in the world.

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A literal translation or interpretation vs. one that captures the spirit of the original

The greatest satisfaction of the interpreter is to achieve total invisibility as well as fidelity. Translators and interpreters work hard to make it seem easy. The better the interpretation (or the translation) delivered the more invisible the medium. That means the “fiberoptic” cable is truly carrying the information without any obstacles. When the meeting exchanges are lively it means the interpreter is doing a great job, and is capturing the spirit of the participants and communicating message and culture and is fulfilling the very important role of cultural conveyor and commercial diplomat.

Translation and interpretation are professional acts of communication. Therefore, translators and interpreters follow a code of ethics, a professional protocol, and abide by professional rules. Conference interpreters and translators never break confidentiality and very often sign non-disclosure agreements with their clients. Professional loyalty is key as well as professional responsibility.

They must perform their work to their best knowledge and ability. Part of their professional responsibility is to prepare for an assignment in different ways: in advance, attend briefing sessions as well as last-minute preparation and in-conference preparation. In addition, to the extra-linguistic preparation they are responsible for glossaries and reference documents. Interpreters work in teams in a small space, therefore they observe a special booth etiquette.

The so-called gray market is the contingent of quite often untrained, improvised, and non-professionals who offer translation and interpretation services at very low prices (that undercut the market) or accept to work under unacceptable conditions. They have no respect for professional ethics and, worst of all, cannot deliver quality interpretation. In this regard, some people believe the United States has a larger gray market than Europe. Some conference organizers eager to get the business sell their clients the cheapest options and cut corners often overlooking important elements for total quality interpretation delivery.

Professional interpreters and translators sign contracts that specify all the details of an assignment or a project. Details include, among others, professional fees, per diem rates, working languages, number of days, travel pay, total word count, teammates, etc. Interpreters count and charge for days worked, translators count and charge for words translated or edited or proofread.

Although there is a long-term knowledge buildup in interpreters and translators, they are actively engaged in updating their resources and continuous learning. They are constantly improving their knowledge and use of new technologies in their work.

What role does technology play in the T&I field? Computers, machine translation, translation management tools, computer assisted translation, translation memory. A good interpretation equipment can make or break an event. Sound and sight are important elements for this profession. Video-conferencing is emerging as an important communication tool in today’s
world for different purposes. There are different types of video-conferencing situations (one language). As these technologies are used more and more across languages they must yet be adapted to satisfy the technical requirements for interpretation.

Interpreting and translating for the media poses very particular challenges and adaptations on the part of the professional delivering these intercultural communication services. Above all, translators and interpreters must strike a balance between riding the technology and innovation wave and adhering to the professional standards without compromising quality.

Professional training programs also must ensure their future graduates are familiar with the latest technologies and are capable of functioning in real life projects making full use of the tools available.

There are several professional associations such as the Association Internationale d’Interpretes de Conference - AIIC and others such as the Translators Guild, the American Translators Association – ATA, and the Federation Internationale de Traducteurs – FIT. These organizations have been around for many years and have worked hard to maintain the professional standards and status of its members. Through their annual conferences they make important contributions to the field and serve as excellent professional exchanges. They also offer continuing education seminars for their members, and even represent them in group-contract negotiations ensuring adequate working conditions and fairness in employment.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to offer a panoramic view of translation and interpretation as an intercultural communication profession, to provide an insight to the world of translators and interpreters, a deeper understanding of the communicative process across languages, the training involved in acquiring the necessary skills to perform a professional translation or interpretation job, as well as a closer look at the individual delivering the services.

Indeed, if there is any human endeavor of a pure intercultural nature that is the art and science of translation and interpretation. A highly specialized field, as ancient as mankind and as updated as cutting edge technologies, it is interdisciplinary because it reaches across sciences and permeates every aspect of society.

The third millenium will undoubtedly bring about an increase in cultural awareness all over the world. As more and more exchanges take place in the world, intercultural communication across languages will be commonplace and will increase the demand for professional services. In the Age of Information and Knowledge, professional expertise in translation and interpretation will no longer be overlooked or underemphasized in international business communication, scientific and technological fora, or educational exchanges for the stakes are too high and competition is fierce.

The translator/interpreter is the bridge that facilitates intercultural communication across languages and cultures. What is the bridge made of? Perhaps we should see this professional as
the *conduit* through which human information flows back and forth seemingly seamlessly and effortlessly. How and what “stuff” is the *conduit* made of?

The T&I expert is culturally knowledgeable, language proficient and possesses the highest skills of a diplomat, a negotiator, a linguist, an artist, a scientist, an analyst, a researcher, a journalist. The training is rigorous, it requires great discipline of the mind and entails a major investment.

The translator/interpreter has the ability to encounter the new and foreign and journey back and forth between cultures across languages. He/she captures the spirit of the original speech/text as well as the listener’s background and culture in order to deliver *total quality communication*.

Words and phrases are carefully scrutinized for their multilevel meaning, denotative and connotative values, chosen according to the codes of language, and used according to the language trends (*buzz words*). The information is received, processed and expressed in the appropriate style with economy of words. The communication expert is the “stuff,” he/she has “high resolution” listening, anticipation, analytical, research, and critical thinking skills. He/she has the ability to assemble ideas and to deal with different speech styles, accents, and speed rates.

Interpreters and translators learn to use the proper words in proper places (*diction, register and style*) and convey the message accurately and faithfully. These wordsmiths cultivate the art of vocabulary-building in their different languages, they do not limit themselves to a mere four thousand-word repertoire.

Speaking the language of our current Information Age, perhaps translators and interpreters should be acknowledged as a sort of *internet of civilization*, extending over time and into the future… ‘til the end of words?

**References**


