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Let's Set the Record Straight: Interpreting vs. Translating

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I have been involved in the field of translation and interpretation most of my life. It is my personal opinion as a practicing professional and educator that most people do not know the difference between interpreting and translating. So let's set the record straight.

Translating and interpreting are two different professions. The training is different, the tasks performed are different, the environment in which translating and interpreting are accomplished is different, the personal qualifications of the individuals involved in these two professions are different, the pay is different, the work load is different, the equipment used by these professionals is different, the stress factor is different, and even the process of professional validation is different.

A translator is a person who translates. Translation is the process of converting a message written in one language, generally known as the source language, into a second language, generally known as the target language.

An interpreter is a person who interprets, and to interpret is to convert a verbal message spoken in the source language into a verbal message spoken in the target language. Stated in another way, a translator writes and an interpreter speaks. Both professions require knowledge of at least two languages. Both professions are very demanding, but at the same time, they are very different.

A translator generally works in a controlled environment. His tools are the word processor, fax machine, modem, and various printed or electronic dictionaries, glossaries, and numerous kinds of reference materials needed to work on a specific subject, i.e. medical, legal, business, international relations, computers, etc. Translators may work at home or at the office. With all the electronic means for communication, it is no longer necessary to live near the area where clients may be found.

Translators can specialize in several fields: 1. technical-scientific, 2. commercial 3. or literary. They are normally paid by the word. Proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, and a thorough knowledge of the source and target language are a must. Translators spend a large portion of their time researching and documenting the subject material to be translated before they actually begin the job of translation.

Most people seem to have at least a basic understanding of what it is that translators do. Fewer people, however, realize that there is more to translating than a knowledge of at least two languages and having access to a bilingual dictionary. Fewer still realize that what they have been calling translation is something else. A case in point would be the TV networks in the US who persist in identifying the person who does the "voice over" for a speaker who does not speak in English as "Voice of the Translator." This "voice over" speaker is an interpreter not a translator.

Interpreters come in different varieties, according to the tasks they perform. There are:

1. Simultaneous interpreters
2. Consecutive interpreters
3. Escort interpreters, and
4. Several combinations of the above.

A simultaneous interpreter works in a language booth, wears headphones and uses a microphone. There are usually two interpreters per booth. One of them performs the task of interpreting, while the other listens and stands ready to relieve his team mate in the event of a lengthy talk or an unforeseen emergency. Simultaneous interpreters are usually isolated from the speaker and are often linked to the actual event via a T.V. monitor set up in the booth. The job of these interpreters is to convert the thoughts and feeling of the speaker in one language

into the same thoughts and feelings in the language of the listener, at the same time that the speaker is speaking. A simultaneous interpreter performs several activities at the same time. He must listen and convert the spoken word into another language, while at the same time he is vocalizing the information he has stored in his brain a few seconds earlier. The time gap between the speaker and the interpreter may widen, yet at no time can the interpreter remain silent or allow himself the luxury of resting for a few minutes. Simultaneous means concurrent.

A consecutive interpreter generally works in closer contact with the speaker. As the orator delivers his speech, the consecutive interpreter attentively listens to the source language, takes notes, organizes the main ideas of the speech in sequential and spacial order, and concentrates on retaining the organization of the speech as well as the contents. When the speaker is finished, the interpreter stands up, moves up to the microphone and re-delivers the same speech but in the target language of the audience.

An escort interpreter works in close contact with people. Most often he is called to perform a hybrid form of consecutive interpretation in which the speaker makes short statements in the source language and the interpreter converts them into the target language. I call this form of consecutive interpretation the "ping-pong" method, because the interpreter bounces back and forth from one language to the other according to which person is speaking at a given moment.

Interpreters are a rare breed of people. Aside from the fact that they must master at least two languages, they must be walking encyclopedias, enjoy a good sense of humor, have excellent control of their emotions, have a pleasant voice with good diction, be resourceful and humble, be willing to work with a partner, and have the proper training for the specialized tasks they must perform.

Proper training is essential for simultaneous interpreters. A simultaneous interpreter may spend two years or more in graduate school learning how to be an interpreter. The interpreter's main objective is to learn how to perform several tasks at the same time. To learn how to perform multiple activities, interpreters spend long hours in the interpretation booth. Here the students listen through ear phones to the source language and simultaneously speak

into a microphone in the target language, practicing exercises which will help to perfect their simultaneous speaking-listening skills.

Student interpreters may begin by "shadowing." In the shadowing exercises student interpreters repeat what they hear in the same language and at the same time they hear it. This exercise mimics an echo effect. Students generally find this exercise very easy to do.

Next, they continue shadowing but the instructor adds a new dimension to the training by having the students write at the same time that they are shadowing. One popular exercise is to have the students shadow while they write numbers in an organized manner on a piece of paper. The numbers may start at 100 and count backwards. The students must list the numbers in descending order. At this point the students begin to see that there is more to becoming an interpreter than just foreign language studies. However, once they are able to write and speak in one language at the same time, they are asked to count backwards by two's, or three's, or five's while they continue to shadow.

As they progress in their studies, new activities are introduced to increase the level of difficulty of the exercises. Students are asked to shadow while copying a written text onto a piece of paper. The sound track and the written text may - at first - be in the same language, but in time the instructor will further increase the difficulty of the exercise by selecting texts in other languages.

Once the students are able to perform listening-speaking-writing activities without problems, they begin to work on "d calage." In d calage the students force themselves to lag behind the speaker as far as possible without missing the natural flow of the speech. In the early stages of the training, students are asked to shadow the speaker leaving a gap of about 10 seconds between what they are listening to and what they are speaking. One of the objectives of this exercise is to learn to establish a comfortable gap between what the speaker says and what the interpreter is expected to say. So far, however, the students are simply repeating what they hear and in the same language as the speaker. In time, the students learn to pace themselves and find a comfortable lag rhythm. It is important for the students to learn how far they can lag behind a

speaker and still retain the meaning of the speech while uttering what was said several seconds before. They also need to learn how to listen for units of meaning rather than words.

Once they are able to get this far, the students are asked to *décalage* by expressing the same ideas as the speaker, in the same language of the speaker, but using different words. The ultimate goal is to be able to listen to a speaker, store the information in the brain, and communicate the information in a different language, while the brain is simultaneously processing what the speaker said a few seconds before. Sound complicated? It is! Interpreters must perform several listening-speaking activities at the same time without losing track of the proper sequence of events in the source language and target language.

Interpreting is a very stressful profession. Unlike translators, interpreters have one chance to get things right. Once they have opened their mouth there is very little chance that they can retract what they have said if it is incorrect. But once the speaker has finished his speech, an interpreter has finished his job. Interpreting is over when the meeting is over. Interpreters don't bring work home. Interpreters are free to prepare for their next assignment or simply relax and do something else. Translators, on the other hand, are still busy translating the written text of the speeches just delivered, so that they may be printed and made available perhaps the next morning.

In conclusion I would like to say that it is the duty of every translator and interpreter, or other associates directly involved with the tasks of translating and interpreting to educate their clients. Therefore, I ask you to do me a big favor and eradicate the incorrect usage of the terms translator and interpreter; let's set the record straight!

Marian B. Labrum is an Assistant Professor of Spanish and Translation, and the Director of the Spanish Translator Training Program at Brigham Young University. She is a member of the Translation Studies Committee and the Honors and Awards Committee of the American Translators Association. She is also an accredited professional translator and interpreter. Professor Labrum has recently been appointed Director of Spanish Language Instruction at Brigham Young University. She also teaches in the Spanish Language School-Summer Program, at Middlebury College, and holds a Doctoral Degree in Modern Languages.