

Taking Language Skills to Work

BY MAURA KATE HALLAM

Exploring the Field of Language Conversion Through Translation and Interpretation

Language conversion: the act of taking writing or speech in one language and converting it to another effectively and accurately; more commonly referred to as translation and interpretation.

From courtroom and medical interpretation to government and business translation to corporate website localization, language conversion is a broad field that has applications in virtually every facet of life.

"It's just fascinating to know that all of these little things you do in your daily life you can access in another language," says Nataly Kelly, an author and professional courtroom interpreter. "There are interpreters for professional athletes, interpreters who work at major film festivals to help negotiate deals, interpreters who work for the Olympics, and even one interpreter who interprets for the International Space Station."

Reliable statistics on the number of professionals working in language conversion are difficult to come by, given that many of them work as freelancers or part-timers. But it is definitely a growing field.

Where Does Localization Fit In?

Localization may be the fastest growing language conversion specialty. It deals specifically with re-purposing media, Web, and audio materials for consumption in other countries. More than simply translating text, localization also deals with testing software to ensure it will function correctly in the target country; making sure color schemes and layouts are culturally appropriate, and even completely re-working taglines and other marketing and sales messages so that they have the same impact on an audience in another country as they do here.

For more information about localization, visit The Localization Industry Standards Association, www.lisa.org.

"Last year," says Dr. Jiri Stejskal, president of the American Translators Association (ATA), "following 10 years of steady growth, ATA welcomed its 10,000th member."

Employment of interpreters and translators is projected to increase faster than the average for all occupations over the 2004–2014 period, according to a U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics report, reflecting "strong growth in the industries employing interpreters and translators."

But for many outside these fields, there is a fundamental lack of understanding of what they are and just what is required to do them well.

Breaking It Down

To begin a discussion of language conversion one must first understand what each of its incarnations really involves.

"Different qualities and skills are required of interpreters and translators," says Izabel S. Arocha, cultural and linguistic educator at Cambridge Health Alliance in Massachusetts, and president of the International Medical Interpreters Association (IMIA). "While these are sister professions that focus on the linguistic conversion from source to target language, they differ strikingly in practice."

The most obvious differences between translation and interpretation are the materials they work with and how they convert them: Translation handles written documents and interpretation deals with spoken language.

"Both translators and interpreters must have excellent knowledge of at least two languages," says Stejskal. "However, translators typically work into a single language—their native tongue—while interpreters work in both directions. Translators must be good writers and be able to spend long hours reading and writing; interpreters must be good verbal communicators and have great hearing and memory. Translators can

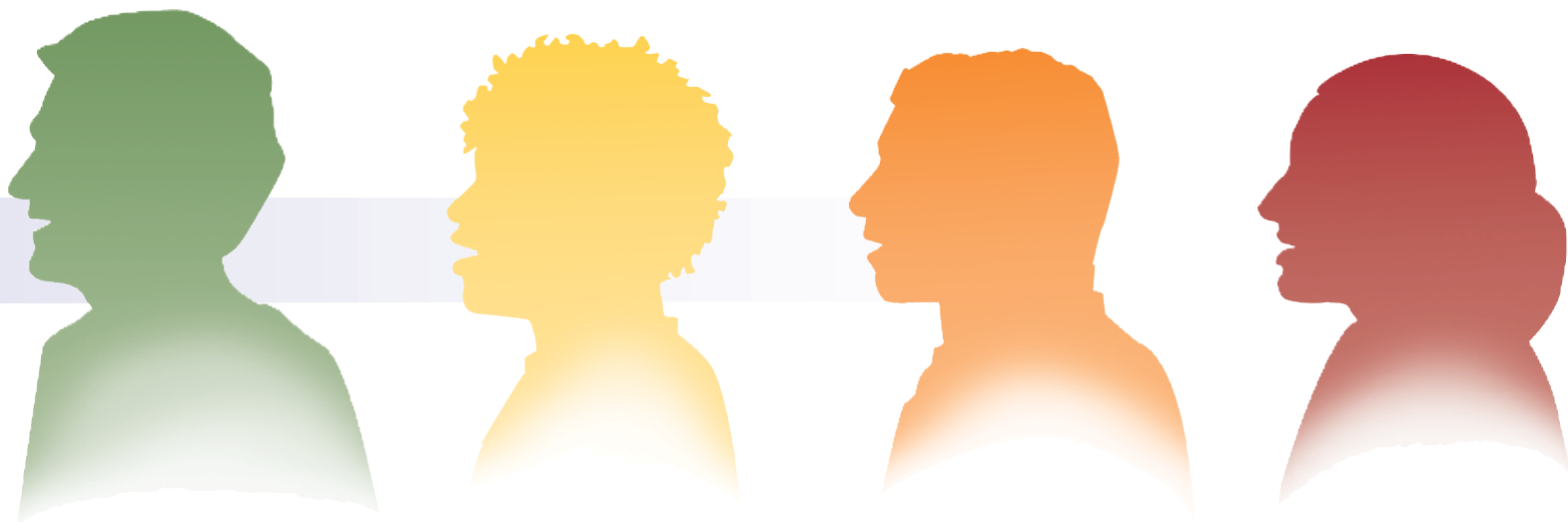


take their time and do research on the text they translate, whereas interpreters must be able to grasp and convey the message immediately.”

“To be a good translator you need the skill of understanding a text completely—not just the language but also its culture, idioms, references,” says Dr. Geoffrey Koby, associate professor of German Translation at Kent State University—one of only two universities, besides California State University, Long Beach, that offers a bachelor’s degree in translation. “No one reads a text more closely than a translator.”

“One of the main challenges is the low barrier to entering the profession,” says Stejskal. “This is particularly true for translation—if you know another language and have at least rudimentary computer skills, you can market yourself as a translator. Since the client cannot readily assess the skills of the service provider, poor translation service can go undetected for a long period of time.”

The misconception that all it takes to be a good translator or interpreter is to be bilingual is, perhaps, one of the greatest chal-



Interpretation is, in many ways, a much more complex undertaking than translation. For one thing, different kinds of interpreting require different skills.

“There are two types of interpreting: consecutive and simultaneous,” says Dr. Edward Dawley, faculty translation advisor for American University’s Graduate Certificate in French Translation program. “Consecutive interpreting is used in situations where the orator speaks for a while, anywhere from a few sentences to a speech of a few minutes, after which the interpreter gives the message in the target language. Simultaneous interpretation, which is much more in the public eye, requires the ability to listen, analyze, and speak at the same time.”

“There’s also sight translation, something that only interpreters do,” says Kelly, “where you take a document that has to be rendered in the target language verbally.”

Because the skills required for each profession are so specialized, it is rare to find someone who works in both fields.

“I have lots of friends who are renowned translators who would never interpret,” she says.

More than Language Training

Clearly, no matter which field of language conversion one undertakes, it requires skills beyond mastering a foreign language.

“There is a misconception that a person who speaks a language and can repeat/write a few simple phrases in the other language can interpret or translate,” says Arocha.

lenges the language conversion professions face. For, in reality, in addition to the research and writing skills needed for translation, and the memory skills of interpretation, language conversion also requires fairly in-depth industry knowledge.

“Would you ask a Boy Scout to do brain surgery because he knows first aid?” asks Koby, who also works as a professional translator.

“Translation is a hugely complex human cognitive activity. We have to have the foreign language expertise, the cultural expertise, and on top of that be pseudo-experts in the industry we’re working in.”

And while, for example, professional courtroom interpreters must be certified in order to serve in that capacity, many industries that avail themselves of interpreters and translators have no such checks and balances. This can, in some cases, have disastrous results.

“If it’s not done properly it could have the result of someone dying or going to jail,” says Jeff Wood, director of career and enrollment management for the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in California.

“Before health care professionals were aware that misinterpretations were a patient safety issue and caused negative health outcomes, bilingual employees, families, and friends acted as facilitators,” says Arocha. “They really were not interpreting everything that was being said accurately by both parties.”

“There is a reason why out of the thousands who take the courtroom certification exam, only 8–10% pass,” says Wood. “So much

A National Security Translation Alert

The effective and accurate translation of foreign language materials is crucial to national security. A large portion of the demand for translators is driven by the U.S. government, and the languages that are needed most are often driven by national security concerns.

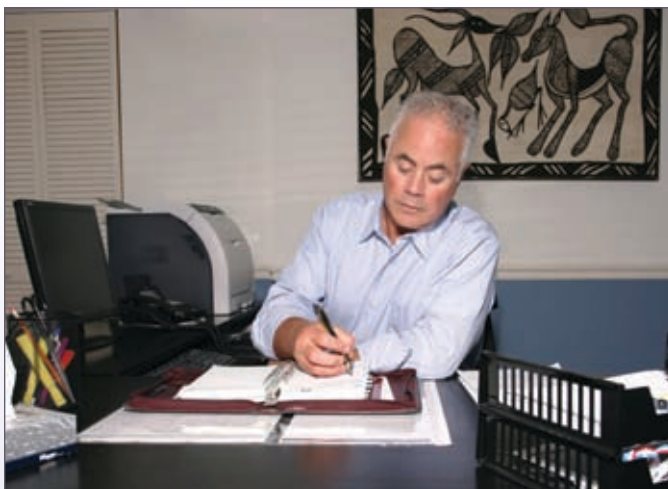
“The languages that seem most promising in terms of employment at this time are Chinese and Arabic, although demand can change, says Dr. Edward Dawley, faculty translation advisor for American University’s Graduate Certificate in French Translation program. “When I was in college in the ‘70s, there was a huge demand for Russian because of the Cold War, but demand seems to have slackened somewhat since then.”

“There is certainly no shortage when it comes to FIGS [French, Italian, German, and Spanish], but when looking for languages of limited diffusion, qualified translators and interpreters are few and far between,” says ATA President Jiri Stejskal. “This is especially true for languages currently needed by the U.S. government, such as Dari or Pashto. . . The shortage of qualified linguists has made headlines on numerous occasions,” he notes.

“There are national security issues,” says Dr. Geoffrey Koby, associate professor of German Translation at Kent State University. “The volume of Arabic communications is so large, there’s too much for analysts to read. We’re at a disadvantage. There is such a huge volume of translation to be done that some things will never be translated and some will be translated poorly.”

Top: Members gather in San Francisco, California, at the 2007 ATA Conference; Bottom left: Translator Tony Guerra at work at CETRA Language Solutions; Bottom right: ATA President Jiri Stejskal shown here (center), along with ATA members Fee Sepahi and Beth Podrovitz

Opposite page: A graduate student works at a computer in the Grad Translation Lab at Kent State University, creating the target text in a word processor. Resource materials and a dictionary are at hand.



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knowledge of legal terms and court terminology is required, and a lot of these people don’t know those terms in their own language, let alone a second language.”

Making a Professional

While the need to use translators and interpreters who are well trained in all facets of their field is certain, it can be a challenge for organizations to find these qualified language conversion professionals—as with many foreign language-related professions in this country. And individuals interested in pursuing translation or interpretation as a career may find it difficult to obtain suitable education and training.

“There is a desperate need for people who are qualified,” says Dr. Alexander Rainof, a professor at California State University, Long Beach, who sits on the board of directors of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT). “But the infrastructure isn’t there.”

“We are the only organization in the United States that is a member of the International Permanent Conference of University Institutes of Translators and Interpreters,” says Wood. “There are maybe 20 to 30 schools in North America that offer translation or interpretation programs; 15 in the United States offer degrees in the field.”

“If you look at the last 50 years, we didn’t have a whole lot of translation training in this country,” says Koby, “In most universities, translation is kind of a stepchild.”



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Still, a number of excellent programs do exist, such as the graduate programs at Kent State, the only university in the United States to have a BS, MS, and PhD program; MIIS, which offers programs in eight languages; California State University, Long Beach, and American University in Washington, DC, which both have graduate certificate programs; as well as the two bachelor's programs at Kent and California State University, Long Beach.

Of course, translation and interpretation programs are not the same as foreign language programs, for students must already come to them with a native or near-native grasp of the languages in which they plan to work.

"We're an applied program," says Wood. "You have to come into the program already being able to apply the language. It's not for language improvement."

Clearly, in addition to formal training, spending significant time in a country that uses the target language is essential for those who are interested in entering one of these professions.

"Study abroad is a great way to master the language," says Stejskal, "and to get to know the people, customs, and culture of a country."

"Study abroad is crucial," agrees Koby. "Think early and think as long as you can—at least a semester; better a year."

A Market Waiting to Be Tapped

As globalization continues to shrink the international and domestic landscapes, and attitudes about learning foreign languages in the United States continue to evolve, the translation and interpretation fields should benefit from increased exposure in this country and a greater understanding of the need for trained, skilled professionals.

"I think that in the past students were not interested in studying foreign languages because of a limited choice of careers," says Stejskal. "In today's globalized world, there are many attractive careers involving foreign languages, including translation and interpretation."

"As the world grows smaller," says Wood, "there will be a better understanding that language conversion is important."

And in a country where foreign language-related professions are sometimes underappreciated—and often underpaid—it is heartening to know that demand for translators and interpreters represents significant earning opportunities for those entering these fields.

"The worldwide translation market is now estimated at about \$10 billion annually and growing," says Stejskal. "The largest and possibly fastest growing segment is represented by the U.S. government. The same applies to the European Union. In the corporate world, demand is also booming. Thanks to the Internet, companies now can easily reach buyers who either do not speak English or who prefer to conduct business transactions in their own language. Without translators and interpreters, communication is impossible."

Maura Kate Hallam is a contributing writer to The Language Educator. She is the owner of Hallam Creative Services (www.hallamcreative.com), a writing and editing firm based in Washington state.

Additional Resources

Looking to learn more about the translation and interpretation professions? Visit these websites to get started.

Membership Organizations

American Translators Association

www.atanet.org

International Medical Interpreters Association

www.mmia.org

National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators

www.najit.org

Undergraduate/Graduate Programs

American University

www.american.edu

California State University, Long Beach

www.csulb.edu

Kent State University

www.kent.edu

The Graduate School of Translation & Interpretation
at Monterey Institute of International Studies

translate.miis.edu

