

Being Bilingual Is Not Enough

By Frank Johnson



Many people consider bilingualism a requirement of any good translator. For instance, Roger Chriss states, “A good translator is by definition bilingual.”¹ Some persons go even further and counsel that the “best translators are those who were raised bilingual or multilingual.”² Many good translators, including some who do not consider themselves bilingual, probably would disagree with both of these statements. When we consider bilingualism in relation to translation and interpreting, the issue is usually whether being bilingual is enough to be a good translator or interpreter. Can almost anyone with high-level bilingual skills do a good job of translating or interpreting? The natural assumption of many people is that translation and interpreting are inherently bilingual activities. After all,

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both activities involve communicating in two languages; therefore, the persons who engage in the activities must be bilingual. Thus, the implied question asks whether bilingualism *by itself* is enough.

Two Distinct Tasks

Including both translation and interpreting in a discussion of bilingualism can be confusing. Although some translators interpret and some interpreters translate, the two activi-

ties are distinct. When we speak of bilingualism, we are usually making a judgment about some perceived level of oral fluency in two languages. Since interpreting is an oral activity, most people would agree that a certain degree of bilingualism is a requirement for an interpreter. However, when we discuss bilingualism in relation to translation, we might want to rephrase the question. Instead of asking whether being bilingual by itself is enough to be a good trans-

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lator, we should ask how important being bilingual is for a translator.

At first glance, defining bilingualism seems like an easy task. A simple definition is that bilingualism is “using or being able to use two languages, especially with equal fluency.”³ Another definition that adds the oral element is “the ability to use either one of two languages, especially when speaking.”⁴ This last definition opens the door to acquiring bilingualism at just about any stage of life by eliminating the requirement that one’s speaking ability be the same in both languages. On the other hand, true bilingualism can be described as a skill that relatively few people possess. “[A] true bilingual is someone who is taken to be one of them by the members of two different linguistic communities, at roughly the same social and cultural level.”⁵ In other words, when among native speakers, a true bilingual can “pass” as a native speaker in either language. This degree of bilingualism is usually obtainable only by people raised in a bilingual household in which both languages and cultures are active.

These definitions of bilingualism are not very helpful in discussing the bilingual skills of interpreters and translators. The first two are not specific enough and the third is too restrictive. In assessing student readiness to take my introduction to interpreting course, I have found the following definition helpful as a minimum acceptable level of bilin-

gualism. For the beginning interpreting student, at a minimum, a person who is bilingual is able to carry on (to understand and be understood) “adult” conversations (conversations about matters of daily living using language normally used by adult speakers) in a second language with a monolingual adult speaker of the second language.

Bilingualism No Guarantee

Students who enter my course with this bare minimum level of bilingualism quickly discover that being bilingual does not guarantee success. In fact, even students who enter with a higher level of bilingualism eventually discover that being bilingual *by itself* is not enough. “Generic bilingualism” is not enough because interpreting is not a generic activity. Interpreters work in specific contexts and use specific vocabularies whose meanings and usage change from context to context, both between subject areas (medical, legal, etc.) and within subject areas (folk medicine, advanced cancer treatment, etc.). The specific advantage the interpreting student with a higher level of bilingualism has over a lower-level student is that the higher-level student can more readily acquire necessary vocabulary and cultural understanding. That acquisition is more of a struggle for the lower-level student.

Even the acquisition of vocabulary and cultural understanding is not enough to turn a beginning inter-

preting student into a skilled interpreter because bilingualism alone does not address communication between languages. Bilingualism is usually defined in terms of communication *in* two languages, not as the ability to communicate *between* two languages.⁶ A bilingual person is able to express his or her own ideas in either of two languages. Sometimes he or she will prefer one language to another in specific contexts, but in any case, the ideas expressed are the person’s own ideas. An interpreter or a translator, on the other hand, has to take someone else’s ideas, often expressed in terms that the interpreter or translator would not use to express the same ideas, and relay those ideas in a second language in a way that is faithful to the original message. This ability to take another person’s ideas, which are expressed in that person’s own idiolect, and transfer those ideas to another language while faithfully communicating the message in all its aspects is the crucial element that separates translation and interpreting skills from mere bilingual skills.

Oral Communication

When we turn from interpreting to translation, we face a significantly different situation. In addition to the inter-linguistic communication skills that are common to translation and interpreting, interpreters have to be able to communicate orally in both languages at the level required by the interpreted context. For bilateral interpreters, their source and target languages are constantly changing. This demands a high level of oral productive ability in both languages. Translators, on the other hand, usually only translate into their native or dominant language, and do not need written or spoken skills in their source language.⁷ Thus, even if we ➡

expand bilingualism to include reading and writing skills as well as listening and speaking skills in both languages, complete functional bilingualism is not a basic skill for translators.

Reading Skills

The one part of an expanded definition of bilingualism that is a required basic skill for translators is a high-level reading skill in the source language. However, this linguistic skill must be combined with subject area expertise in the target language.

The best translator for a specific text would be one who is an expert in the subject matter and who knows the source language well enough to know when the foreign text says something other than what the individual's expertise would lead him or her to expect it to say.⁸

I have heard it said that a good translator must know his or her specialty well and be a good writer in the target language, and that it is also helpful to know the source language.⁹ Perhaps this is a bit of hyperbole because in-depth knowledge of the source language within the context of the subject area and source text is very valuable for a translator. Many times regional differences and nuances in how matters are expressed in the source language can change considerably how a statement should be translated. A translator needs to be a very good reader in the source language in his or her field.

Basic Skill Level Differences

For translators, bilingualism is not the basic skill that it is for interpreters. The basic foreign language skill for translators is the ability to read and understand the source language in the

specific translation context to the extent required to be able to render faithfully the message of the source text into the target language. Just as oral bilingualism implies a degree of biculturalism since language and culture go hand-in-hand, the translator's foreign language skill requires a degree of biculturalism. However, the translator's biculturalism is a focused biculturalism because it refers specifically to the translator's specialty area. Thus, a translator who specializes in legal translations from Spanish into English in the

target language with far better fluency than the average native speaker. Whereas the native speaker or writer needs to express only his own thoughts in his own language, the translator is expected to render in the target language any idea that anyone can formulate in any of the languages he translates.¹⁰

Above all else, a good translator is a good writer. It does not matter how much subject expertise or high-level foreign language reading skill a trans-

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U.S. must be culturally literate in the legal systems of different Spanish-speaking countries, for the most part civil law systems, in contrast to the common law system of the U.S.

Even when there is an acceptable level of bilingualism on the part of the interpreter or high-level reading skills on the part of the translator, along with the development of bicultural competencies and inter-language communication skills, the professional skills of translation and interpreting (including technical skills) still have to be developed. For the translator, the most important professional skill is to be able to write well in the target language.

Aside from the obvious requirement that the translator be able to read and understand the source language, the most important prerequisite is the ability to write the

lator has if the translator cannot express the message well in the target language. We could say that just as an acceptable level of bilingualism is a basic requirement and a starting point for an interpreter, an acceptable level of writing skill in the target language is a basic requirement and a starting point for a translator.

A Starting Point

Being bilingual is not enough. For interpreters, bilingualism is a start and a requisite skill, but by itself, bilingualism is not enough for interpreters to be good interpreters. For translators, bilingualism is helpful. For one thing, it enables translators to communicate better with direct clients who may be reluctant to entrust a job to a translator who cannot speak their language.¹¹ However, it is not a requisite skill and its importance is far overshadowed by the importance of

For more information

“Professional Language Translators”

by Roger Chriss (Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions) www.kwintessential.co.uk/translation/articles/professional-language-translators.html

“Preserving Your Words in Translation”

by Jennifer Hutchins
www.writing-world.com/international/hutchins.shtml

Merriam-Webster OnLine Search

<http://mw4.m-w.com/dictionary/bilingual>

U.S. Department of State

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/geography/glossary.htm>

having a combination of subject area expertise, high-level reading skills in the source language, and excellent writing skills in the target language.

Notes

1. Chriss, Roger. “Professional Language Translators” (Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions), www.kwintessential.co.uk/translation/articles/professional-language-translators.html.
2. Hutchins, Jennifer. “Preserving Your Words in Translation,” www.writing-world.com/international/hutchins.shtml.
3. *Merriam-Webster OnLine Search*, <http://mw4.m-w.com/dictionary/bilingual>.
4. U.S. Department of State, <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/geography/glossary.htm>.
5. Thiery, Christopher. “True Bilingualism and Second Language Learning,” quoted in Burce, Kaya. “The Role of Bilingualism in Translation Activity.” *Translation Journal* (January 2007).
6. For instance, Lam discusses bilingualism as “competence and communication **in** two languages [emphasis added] (93).” Lam, Agnes. “Bilingualism,” in *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Edited by R. Carter and D. Nunan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 93-100.
7. Conference interpreters who primarily interpret from their second acquired language (L2) to their first language (L1) probably fall somewhere between bilateral interpreters and translators. That is, they primarily need to understand spoken L2 in order to be able to produce spoken L1.
8. Tinsley, Royal L., Jr. “Translation as a Career Option for Foreign Language Majors,” www.mla.org/udfl/bulletin/V07N4/074025.htm, quoted in Wanwei, Wu. “Productive Bilingualism and Translator Education,” www.translation-services-usa.com/articles/productive_bilingualism3.shtml.
9. This is my paraphrase of a statement made by ATA President-elect Nicholas Hartmann during a conference session I presented at the 2008 Annual Education Symposium of the Mid-America Chapter of ATA at Southern Nazarene University, March 29, 2008.
10. Tinsley, op. cit.
11. McKay, Corinne. “Keeping Up Your Source Language Skills,” <http://thoughtsontranslation.com/2008/04/01/keeping-up-your-source-language-skills>.

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