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**TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING:  
IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?**

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## Abstract

This presentation aims at showing the similarities and differences between translating and interpreting. From the viewpoint of the Interpretive Theory of Translation, developed at the ESIT (University of Paris III - Sorbonne Nouvelle), it shows that while sharing a common theoretical foundation, the two processes have different operational constraints. Important implications for translator and interpreter training resulting from these operational differences will then be discussed.

**Key-words:** translating, interpreting, Interpretive Theory of Translation, translator and interpreter training

For the layperson, anyone who speaks a second language reasonably can translate; and anyone who translates can, of course, interpret. This, of course, for the few among them who realize that there might be a difference between translating and interpreting. And for many people language teachers are also automatically translators and occasionally interpreters as well. After all, they speak the language in question, don't they? Isn't that all that matters?

But what are really the differences and similarities between translating and interpreting? Can one say that knowing a second language is all that matters for interpreting and translating? What are the possible implications for training?

## The similarities

The most striking and, hopefully, best known of the differences between translating and interpreting is that translators deal with written texts while interpreters deal with spoken discourse. But let's put the differences aside for a while and concentrate on the similarities, some of which are quite obvious. The main aim of both interpreting and translating is to allow for a message expressed in a given language to be understood by people who are not familiar with the language in which it was originally conveyed. In other words, the translator and the interpreter are professionals who allow for a message to go across a "language barrier." They form a sort of "bridge" without which any given message would be limited to only one language community, which in this globalized world is inconceivable. It also stands to reason that both the translator and the interpreter must be very proficient in *both* the source and the target languages—in other words, the language in which the message is originally conveyed and the language into which it is eventually transposed. Both professionals must also keep on learning, for they must keep abreast with developments in practically all fields of human knowledge—as they may on one day deal with a message involving new concepts in, say, laser technology and on the subsequent day have to handle quite a different message on Jung's views on the relationships between religion and politics.

## Common Theoretical foundation

The theoretical groundwork on which the process of transposing from a source language into a target language is founded is, to a large extent, the same. Let's examine

this in some more detail. For this purpose, the words *translation*, *translator*, and *translate* will be used in their broader sense here, to cover both the written and the oral modes of transposing a message from one language into another.

It is not unusual to find people who think that translating is no more than converting words from one language into another. Many of us who deal with several kinds of clients, either as translators or interpreters, have at some time heard people wondering why all this fuss about translation. After all, they reason, the words are all in the dictionary and you, translators, should know the dictionary. All those who have tried their hand at translating will know that things tend to be somewhat more complex. Not only do we, translators, not know all the words in the dictionary but even if we did the problem would not be solved there. It doesn't take long to realize that a computer can easily be programmed with "all the words in the dictionary"—or, for that matter, "in the dictionaries"—but translations done by computers are, to say the least, the laughing stock of anyone who is somewhat familiar with two different languages. We are all too familiar with the results of such attempts.

The main task of a translator then is far from being the conversion of words from the source language to the target one. Translators must understand the original message, either oral or written, and then express it again in the target language, with all details and nuances contained in the original. An adequate translation is absolutely faithful to the *sense* of the original message and, at the same time, absolutely faithful to the *nature* of the target language. In order to achieve this, the translator must not only completely grasp the subtleties of the source language but also understand the situation—or context—in which any word or phrase is used. In other words, the translator must be sure to comprehend the intention of the author in using this or that expression, in choosing this or that word. Why was one word or phrase used instead of another? It is clear that knowing "all the words in the dictionary" will never account for such a task. The human translator can do what no computer has been able to so far: bring into the translation process all his or her knowledge of the subject itself, and also his or her familiarity with the historical and cultural backdrop against which the original message was created.

The translator must also be aware of the same aspects in relation to the target audience of the original. The translation process obviously involves the command of two languages—but it also involves two (or more) ways of thinking and of understanding. In other words, it is a linguistic as well as an extralinguistic process. To use the basic concepts of Saussurean Linguistics, translation does not happen in the realm of *langue* (the overall set of rules of language) but rather in that of the *parole* (the actual use of the system by its individual speakers). This is to say that there are no pre-established relationships between expressions in different languages but that this relationship will depend on how, where, why or when they are used. However, some proper nouns, such as *London*, for example, or words of a more technical nature, of which thousands exist, such as *diabetes*, can be safely said to have a somewhat fixed correspondence across languages. No personal analysis seems to be needed in order to grasp the meaning of the English word *diabetes*, which can be quite safely rendered into *diabetes* in either Spanish or Portuguese. Not much thinking is needed either to render *London* in Portuguese or Spanish as *Londres*. Let's look, however, at the phrase *brain-drain* in a sentence taken from an article that appeared on CNN's website on the 10 years of the reunification of Germany. It reads: " 'We have a brain-drain and at the same time an outflow of youth,' said professor Rudolf Boch of Chemnitz's Technical University." The phrases "evasão de cérebros" or "fuga de cérebros", which, at first, seem to be the best choices in Portuguese, would hardly be adequate in the translation of the text in question since the town of

Chemnitz, on the former border of the two Germanies, has probably never been a repository of intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists. The person quoted here simply means that many trained professionals have gone westward in search of better payment. This becomes clear from the reading of the paragraphs appearing before and after this is quoted in the original text. It is not a situation similar to the rise of the Nazi regime, for instance, for which the phrase “brain-drain” has been used to explain the exodus which included, among others, Einstein, Freud, and others of similar caliber and which could properly be translated as “evasão de cérebros” or “fuga de cérebros” into Portuguese. But skilled factory technicians leaving in search of better pay would hardly be the case when “evasão de cérebros” would be used in Portuguese. All this knowledge has to come into play when translating this phrase as used here. The translator has to use information hinted at earlier in the text as well as some world knowledge of the world in order to arrive at the best translation. This is only one example of such a situation. More instances of such an occurrence can easily be found in any oral or written text being translated, encompassing several different aspects for culture, historical situation and many other constraints.

The concepts just outlined in the preceding paragraph form the basis of the so-called *Interpretative Theory of Translation* (or *théorie du sens*, as it is often called in French), which originated at the ESIT (École Supérieure d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs) of the Paris III University (Sorbonne Nouvelle), spearheaded by Danica Seleskovitch and, subsequently, Marianne Lederer. They are very clearly developed and exemplified in several articles and books published by the two researchers; most of them, unfortunately for the English-speaking community, have been published only in French.<sup>1</sup> The theory first originated with the study of oral translation (conference interpretation) and was eventually applied to written translation as well. As stated above, the basic ideas underlying the process of either oral or written translating are the same. How do the two processes then differ? It could be said with reasonable safety that the main differences are due mainly to the way in which the two operationally-different activities of translation and interpretation are carried out, being the former a written process and the latter an oral one.

### **The differences**

While the translator works from a written source which can be read several times and analyzed according to his/her own tempo, the interpreter works from an oral input, the speed of which is totally under the control of the speaker. The time in which the analysis of this input has to be carried out by the interpreter in search of its sense is determined by the rate at which the speech is being given. Whether it be the case of consecutive or simultaneous interpretation—and nowadays most interpretation is done in simultaneous mode—the interpreter can’t have all the time he or she might think necessary to arrive at the sense or intention of the speaker in saying this or that phrase, in making this or that comment. Although the interpreter is not on Broadway nor Hollywood, the show must go on and the speaker will usually go on speaking, most times totally oblivious of the fact that he or she is being interpreted.

As for researching when in doubt, the situation is also quite different. When sense is unclear, the translator can easily resort to reference works, search the Internet or call a fellow translator or a specialist in a given field of knowledge in search of a precise term or to learn more about a given subject so that the idea of the original is clear before he or she has to come up with a translation into the target language. Faced with a similar situation, the interpreter, who can also make use of these resources *before the event*, will only have a split second to come to a solution. His or her preparation is done before the event, as

just mentioned, when he or she will try to learn as much as possible about a certain field of knowledge in the shortest possible time—whether it is oil drilling in the North Sea in two days or automation of parking lots in an afternoon—in order not only to understand what is being discussed at a meeting of specialists in the field, but also to be able to speak like them, using language that is appropriate enough, so as to allow him or her to impersonate the speaker, for whom he or she is “the voice”, for those who don’t speak the language of the person who has the floor at a given moment. Regardless of much previous preparation, it is absolutely impossible to predict everything that is going to be said in a meeting. One can never foresee examples and anecdotes which will be used by delegates in any one meeting, often totally unrelated to the subject in question. One can never predict which questions will be asked and which answers will be given. Dictionaries and encyclopedias have little use in the booth for the simple fact that there is obviously no time to look up anything while one’s input keeps coming in. This is why interpreters need to be cold-blooded and quick-thinking. They work under constant stress to perform flawlessly all the time. Decisions involving millions of dollars, or the peace between nations, may well collapse due to faulty interpretation.

Another obvious difference concerns the output. The written final product of the translator’s work can, should and, most often, will be reviewed and revised, first by the translator and then, hopefully, by a different reader. Although translator’s clients are always in a big rush and translation jobs are often requested as an emergency or a priority, there is usually some time for a second reading of the translated text. Ideally the translator will put it aside for a few days and then read it over, making appropriate changes. Even in a rush job, the translation can still be read by a different reader as soon as the translator has finished working on it. The output of the interpreter’s work, however, cannot be revised. Once uttered, it will be heard by the target audience immediately and can’t be taken back. The experienced interpreter can always rephrase something left unclear or an idea whose sense was not well understood immediately, by using a phrase or saying a sentence “somewhere down the road” to establish the correct sense. However, what has been said before cannot be unsaid and it takes some experience in the booth to be able to correct oneself without causing havoc in the meeting and while one’s input keeps coming in. In consecutive, of course, the interpreter has more time to organize his or her ideas before delivering his interpretation, and has a more complete idea in mind when saying something, or in other words, knows where he or she is going. In simultaneous, however, the interpreter is walking a tightrope, and has to resort to all his experience and wit in order to correct something wrong. While it is true that interpreters work with *units of sense* (or *chunks of meaning*, depending on one’s theoretical approach) and never begin translating words as they are heard, there is a limit to how much an interpreter can lag behind the speaker without having trouble in storing all concepts in his or her short-term memory. And more often than one would like, the sense of an utterance sometimes only becomes clear after several sentences or even paragraphs. A simultaneous interpreter can never wait that long to start speaking, not only due to the constraint just mentioned regarding short-term memory but also because such a situation would generate chaos among listeners in the audience.

### **Implications for training**

#### **Language requirements**

In view of what has been said above, one does not need a lot of thinking to realize that the training of interpreters and translators needs to be different. The learning of languages is not the question here. Both have to be very proficient not only in their foreign

language (or languages) as in their native one before they can start training as either translators or interpreters. A few words on the knowledge of foreign languages seem to be in place here. The only difference that may be allowed for in terms of their language proficiency is that translators don't need to understand the spoken form of their foreign working language or languages or speak them fluently. Pronunciation, intonation patterns and the like are irrelevant for the translator. His/Her written target language—preferably his or her own native language—, however, must be flawless. A translator is, above all, a writer and must have the qualities of a good writer and should be well-read in the classics of his own language. To translate into a foreign language can be very dangerous, but the scope of this paper, however, does not allow for considerations on this matter.

The interpreter, on the other hand, has to concentrate on the spoken language. He or she has to be able to understand the subtleties in the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, its intonation patterns and their implications for sense, and so on. He or she has also to be able to understand, for instance, English as spoken by Americans (whether they be from Texas or Boston), by the British (whether from London or Liverpool), and also English as spoken by Japanese, Arabs, Germans, French, and many others who use it in international conferences. Also, an interpreter's target language, even and mainly if it is one's native language, should not be marked by strong regional accents and word choices. An interpreter's speech should also be as clear as possible, with syllables enunciated carefully and word endings clearly pronounced. For some, it comes as a blessing that they won't have to worry with spelling and punctuation, though.

One word is needed here as regards interpreting into a foreign language. Like translating, the pitfalls are similar. Unlike translating, however, it is something that more and more is being required in the interpretation market, even in international organizations, which was not the case some years ago. As it is, then, the trainee has to go to great lengths to build up and/or brush up the spoken form of his non-native working language(s). The important vowel and consonant distinctions mentioned above have to be carefully mastered and the proper intonation patterns have to be acquired, not only as a receptive skill but also as a productive one. Interpreters usually have to switch language directions as quickly as a question is asked and its answer is given.

#### *Interpreter and translator training per se*

Assuming language problems have been ironed out, translators and interpreters have to concentrate on different skills during their training. In neither case, however, is the teacher's role to shower them with vocabulary. Although some students (and teachers) seem to like it and it lends "face validity" to the teaching, teaching vocabulary seems to be quite a futile effort. For one thing, it is impossible to give students all the vocabulary they will need in their working life. Also, the teacher has to bear in mind that vocabulary changes from time to time and from place to place. Above all, however, it will impress on the minds of trainees that translating and interpreting is a question of knowing a lot of words in both languages and their correspondence, which is the last thing a teacher will want to ingrain into their minds. Quite the contrary, one of the main problems a translation teacher faces is precisely to do away with this preconceived notion. As for the curriculum itself, apart from a class on theory of translation and interpretation to clearly lay the foundation for the process, they should be trained in separate classes. A future translator will need to sharpen his/her writing skills, as well as their research skills when faced with a problem posed by a text. In some cases, word-processing skills may also need to be taught.

Trainee-interpreters, on the other hand, will have to practice listening for sense and not for words. A useful technique, for instance, is to have students “interpret” from English into English or from Spanish into Spanish or Portuguese into Portuguese. In other words, **paraphrasing**, so that they can feel that the same message can be expressed using different wording and sentence structure. They will also have to learn to **concentrate on the framework of the message** in order to be able to remember it without having to try to memorize the wording in which it is presented. They will have to **progress from the consecutive to the simultaneous** mode, for it is in the consecutive that they learn to analyze what is being said without the time constraints imposed by simultaneous. Before they go into the booth to practice simultaneous, they have to **master the process of analysis** in the consecutive mode. They will also have to be able to **listen and speak at the same time**, so that their own voices don’t prevent them from listening. Some voice coaching may also be useful, just as word-processing is useful for translators.

Thus, it is not difficult to see that the training of translators and that of interpreters require different curriculums in order to practice different skills. There is nothing that prevents a translator from working as an interpreter or the other way round, as long as the person has acquired the different skills needed to perform satisfactorily in these two similar, and at the same time different, professions. For schools to claim that they can train both professionals in a single course and in a very short period of time, especially considering language deficiencies on the part of most trainees, which will have to be worked out in the process, is simply contrary to reason. But this would be another paper.

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There are still many chapters by the authors mentioned above in several conference proceedings, as well as articles published in journals such as *Meta, Etudes De Linguistique Appliquee, Babel, Multilingua, Paralleles*, both in French and English.