

A Consumer's Guide to Translation

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Introduction

Translation is successful communication through a language barrier.

This “success” can be judged a number of ways. The only one you need to worry about is the outcome desired by the speaker, author, or party otherwise commissioning the translation.

There may be a number of participants in any activity involving communication, and the presence of a language barrier can be frustrating, and in certain circumstances unfair.

All participants want communication based on a common language.

A translator (or interpreter) is responsible for restoring this experience to them, as far as is possible in practice.

In this guide we explain what is and isn't possible. We also show what responsibilities rest with both you as the client, and the translator, to ensure that everything possible actually happens. The guide also seeks to explain the impossible and offer some palliative measures.

Part of this guide deals with the workings of language. Talking about talking and splitting hairs over semantics can become mighty tedious, but we encourage you to persevere. Translators are by definition people who both love language and are uniquely qualified to explain it. There has been a lot of money - and meaning - lost through failure to heed their advice.

Let this guide work in everyone's favour to maximise return on investment and clarity in communication.

Who's who

Translation is work and it must be paid for.

The **buyer** of translation services may be an individual or a company, or it may be the government, via funding that flows down through ministries and departments to agencies and their officers.

The **seller** may be a translator operating as a sole trader, or an agency that dispatches subcontractor interpreters and sub-contracts written work to freelance translators.

We may refer to the parties on either side of the transaction as the buyer or the seller, but we will refer to the actual people doing the work as “translators” and “interpreters”, and we will reserve the word “client” for the person or people who are directly involved in the generation or receipt of the text or speech that is the object of the translation process.

Regarding the difference between a translator and an interpreter, the most reliable convention in current Australian English is that “Translation” is written and “Interpreting” is spoken. (It is a useful distinction, but so recently adopted as not to be supported by the current Oxford English Dictionary.)

For the sake of brevity we have adopted the following conventions in this guide: “Translation” meaning both written and spoken, and “written translation” and “Interpreting” where the difference is important.

Expectations

The more realistic the expectations of a buyer the better the outcome of any transaction.

Before we discuss any of the unique considerations involved in translation, it is worth making the point that this is a transaction, just like any other purchase of goods and services.

The work must be carried out only after there is agreement on what is to be done and how much it will cost. Buyers must be prepared to explain their requirements and sellers must be competent to grasp them and act on them.

It demands that standards are defined, that promises are kept, and that the dealings are documented, transparent, and seen to be fair to all concerned.

Buyers are strongly encouraged to concern themselves solely with the quality of the service they have purchased and with the seller's capacity to account for that quality, and willingness and ability to put things right when they go wrong. Just as the buyer would for any other type of purchase.

In the case of written translation, the question of who actually carries out the work and what their qualifications, experience and first and second languages are may be of academic interest, but it is of no relevance to the primary question of whether the buyer gets what they've paid for.

So any buyer who has a problem with the service is encouraged to reject any reference to these issues by a seller seeking to explain or defend the contested service. The argument "But the translation must be alright because our person is accredited" is just as spurious as "But the meal must taste alright because our chef was trained". If it doesn't taste right, make them cook it again or don't pay for it.

Demand quality in translation. Demand translators who can explain to your satisfaction what quality is.

Accountability

It is true to say that translation may not be as easily "tasted" as a meal in a restaurant. Does this mean that translation is unique in some way? It certainly does. It means that the seller of translation services will go much further than a restaurateur would to demonstrate the quality of their work.

They will have various strategies for making the processes and product of their work intelligible to the buyer: things that are normally invisible due to the very language barrier the seller is being paid to overcome. Sellers must be prepared to do this because each and every buyer is perfectly within their rights to ask as many questions as they please about the work they are paying for, and to have those questions answered.

Beware of the seller who can only respond "That's just the way it is" when asked to explain any decision they have made in their work. This is probably a bilingual person masquerading as a translator. A professional translator will do everything within their means to alleviate the inequity of the buyer's position in having access to only one of the pair of languages. A bilingual person hides behind the language barrier.

Translation is not magic. It is a conscious and intellectual process that can be explained to anyone who will listen, and the ability to explain it is the mark of a professional.

Finding a translator

The directory on this website is the best place to look for a translator or interpreter, but not the only one. AUSIT is the only national professional association, has existed since 1987 and continues to grow. But there are many competent professionals who are not members.

NAATI also have an online directory, but it only shows who is accredited and does not indicate whether they practise or not. (Many people become accredited out of interest and have no commitment to further developing their service or skills).

The Yellow Pages is the next best place to look, as anyone who can afford to advertise there is obviously busy enough to at least recoup their costs through actual work. Although this should never substitute for those expectations the consumer should have of quality and accountability outlined above.

Ringling a university or a consulate to find a translator is trying to force what is probably an urgent need for prompt service of verifiable quality, through large bureaucracies with little to no grasp of such concepts, so this is not recommended.

Accreditation

The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (N.A.A.T.I.) tests and accredits translators and interpreters in most languages and at different levels (see the item on Accreditation in the AUSIT website). Buyers are encouraged to deal with only accredited translators, but are warned that this not sufficient to guarantee that they are able to solve your problem.

As is made plain in other places in this guide, there are many conditions which must be fulfilled before translation can be successfully carried out - conditions that have nothing to do with the qualifications of the translator.

Your responsibilities

If you have a text you want translated, or an occasion requiring the presence of an interpreter, it is not enough to send the document off and wait for it to come back in another language. Nor will the service be adequate if all you tell the interpreter is the time and place you need them.

Communication is only possible, even without a language barrier, when there is contextual knowledge. Even when everyone speaks the same language people need to know where a message comes from, why people speak, what they have been through, what they are trying to achieve, who they are, and so on, before they can understand. So it is with translating. The translator must know as much as you do about the document, the meeting, the desired outcomes and many other things.

If you are unsure about what other things a translator may need to know, don't worry. A professional translator will ask. If a person you have engaged to do a translation doesn't ask you any questions, this may indicate a lack rather than a wealth of experience.

When engaging an interpreter it is advisable for example to specify time, place, names of all participants, the details of their companies or organisations if applicable, the relative positions of all the people, the aims of the participants and any information relating to previous meetings or correspondence, especially where these may have been translated by different parties.

If parties to the meeting are going to be referring to written material during the meeting then it is crucial that the interpreter be provided with a copy of this material beforehand - especially if it has already been translated, in which case both the original and translation will be required.

Conflict of interest is another aspect to be kept in mind. Many interpreters work in languages spoken by small communities, so briefing is an important opportunity for the interpreter to ensure they are not about to interpret personal matters for someone they know. Some language groups are highly sensitive to the age, sex, clan affiliation, dialect or country of origin of the

interpreter. It is worth confirming that there are no surprises in store for the participants in a poorly planned meeting. The briefing is the last chance you will have to do this.

Interpreters at work

There are many things to be considered when an interpreter is involved in a meeting, hearing, interview or tour. If the interpreting is to be in consecutive mode, the schedule must be generous to allow for the time taken to translate everything. If it is to be simultaneous, a booth and appropriate audio system will be necessary in the case of a conference, whereas headphones may be required for a trial proceedings or training courses for example, where a small number of NESB people must be able to follow the speech of everyone else in the room. In this latter case it is also important to position both interpreter and listeners where they will least inconvenience the other listeners, and to advise the others beforehand that whispered interpreting will be taking place.

Simultaneous interpreting in either setting can be exhausting; normally a team of two or three interpreters will be required, each working for a 20-30 minute stretch at a time. They will need room to place their belongings and space to spread out any materials they may be relying on both while they are interpreting and during breaks. Drinking water must always be provided for interpreters.

Where meetings or discussion are to be interpreted in consecutive mode, consideration must be given to the seating arrangements. Interpreters must be able to face the people to whom they speak and still be in a position to see the things these people can see, such as each other, overheads or a main speaker.

Whilst interpreters are free to negotiate the provision of services other than interpreting, it is nevertheless important to understand clearly what is strictly the role of the interpreter.

Their core task begins and ends with the translation of text or speech. To seek their input or advice on cultural issues or the character of other participants, or on the best way to market products or resolve disputes, is asking them to do something for which they claim no expertise, and therefore for which there can be no accountability. Interpreters are free to do this at their own risk, but be aware that the entreaty alone can distract them from the work they are being paid to do, can cause doubt in the minds of the NESB people as to the reliability of the process and impartiality of the interpreter, and can place the interpreter in an ethically untenable position. Any discussion of this nature is best carried out when they are not interpreting and when you understand their limited liability.

How much will it cost?

“Standard Rates” for written translation, expressed as a dollar figure per word, are often advertised by bigger enterprises like agencies turning over large volumes of work. But these are in most cases an artificial construct of the company concerned, which for business planning purposes has to extract from a large number of subcontractors an undertaking to stick to certain rates. Due to the large volume, the subcontractors are able to make up on some jobs what they lose on others. There is nothing wrong with this except that it fuels the misconception in the market that there is such a thing as a “standard job”.

Translation is not typing. Every job brings with it a different combination of research, analytical, compositional, editorial and formatting tasks. Put simply, some are very easy, some are very hard.

In reality each job ‘costs’ the translator a different amount and many individual or freelance translators charge accordingly.

If an agency can meet all the requirements set out above regarding their ability and willingness to take responsibility for the quality of the service they are delivering, there is certainly nothing wrong with entrusting your work to them. Often their resources enable them to invest in advanced software and other allied services, so they may be able to offer services that smaller companies or individuals can't. On the other hand, an individual translator may also have all the advanced software etc. required for your particular job, and you should be able to find this out by asking the question.

Interpreting rates are usually rates per unit of time spent interpreting. Rates can vary widely according to the language, whether you are dealing with an individual or an agency, and the pricing policy of the individual.

Each and every translator is the final arbiter of what they are worth and the only principle that modifies this is the market. A busy and expensive translator is obviously offering a level of services unmatched by a cheaper translator who is always available.

Both written translation and interpreting can provide some of the most daunting and exhausting intellectual challenges on Earth. They require long experience and rigorous training to do competently. They demand of the translator specialised knowledge, ethical vigilance and emotional control that must go yard-for-yard, for short bursts, with any member of the legal or medical profession for example.

If you are dealing with translation for the first time, it can probably safely be said that translation will cost more than you expected.

How long will it take?

In very general terms it takes as long to translate something as it did to formulate it in the first place. Conversation may be translated almost immediately with very little sacrifice of content, style and emotional impact, because it is a spontaneous speech act in the original. Written speeches and presentations may also often be translated immediately, even simultaneously, but the sacrifice will be in inverse proportion to the time and materials the interpreter is given to prepare with.

In written translation it is wise to leave the translator at least as much time as it took to compose the original. Sometimes longer is necessary if the original is the product of a complex process involving many different people, as in the case of a patent, a set of instructions or a manual.

Some Golden Rules

Know your translator

If you have a document that is important to you, don't leave it to your printer, or a friend who knows someone at university, to have it translated. You need to have the translator (or in the case of an agency a person qualified to represent the entire process) sitting in front of you, asking questions. There are likely to be questions at the beginning, during and at completion of the work. And the translator shouldn't be paid until they've answered all of yours.

If you are to attend a business meeting where your interests are at stake and the other side assure you that one of their party speaks English, you should thank them and bring your own interpreter. No one at a business meeting has got time to interpret and fulfill some other function at the same time. No one but a person you pay is obliged to ensure throughout that you are hearing everything and that you are speaking when you need to, and will debrief you on any difficult points.

If you are a legal practitioner who has a NESB witness, make the time to brief your interpreter days in advance. Give them all the information they ask for no matter how unrelated it may

seem to you. Your business may be the facts of the matter. The interpreter's job is to make sense of those facts when expressed in a language that may have an entirely different system of number, tense, gender, plurality and so on. Without that briefing they may well be lost, and with them your facts.

Use the same translator

Every time you work with a translator you are investing time and money in a familiarity with the subject. The subject in this case is far more specific than, say, a field like agriculture or law. It may be the specific matters of a particular court case. If the case is heard over a period of time and the interpreter is required only intermittently, it is very inefficient to have different interpreters working on different days, especially if there is no liaison between them. This is because each new interpreter will have to spend the first half day or so familiarising themselves with the background and key issues of the case before they move onto the specific question of what terms all the participants have settled on as describing these issues.

Similarly ongoing marketing activity will be best served by cultivating a thorough knowledge of the company and its product in the mind of one translator. This person may assist in the initial translation of product names by discussing the actual products with you in depth. This person is now equipped with much more than just the name of the product when he or she comes to interpret for people asking similar questions.

Some Red Herrings

Technical terminology and specialisation

Where the subject to be interpreted or translated is of a technical nature, people tend to place emphasis on whether or not the translator or interpreter has direct knowledge of that field. It is undoubtedly wiser for you to worry only about whether they have direct knowledge of translation and interpreting.

A professional translator will already have a very good general knowledge as a result of both their personal history and the wide variety of work a translator does. They will also have the necessary skills to prepare for highly technical work by obtaining and absorbing relevant material - and the cooperation of the client is crucial here - and more than anything else they will have a very clear understanding of the importance of nomenclature as compared to other issues like the analysis and generation of texts, types of discourse, and the importance of precedent.

It is this last point that is relevant. Simply put, knowing what everything is called is not the biggest problem for a translator, it is just the only one visible to a non-translator.

Conversely, a specialist working in the field who happens to be bilingual and who is put upon to translate will find themselves facing a long list of tasks in which they have no experience or confidence; committing in a split second to lexical and stylistic equivalents for not only technical terminology but colloquialisms and idioms; reconciling the grammar of one language with the naturalness of another; managing and processing every utterance in a multi-person dialogue in which they are expected to have no more conscious part than a rag doll. These are all difficult tasks for even the most fluent bilingual people.

When a translator says they specialise in written translation in a particular field, this means that they predominately do this kind of work and therefore turn it over more quickly with less preparation time, making it more profitable. But the set of skills that define them as a translator have nothing to do with medicine, law, chemicals or engineering. They have to do with language and translation. And the nature of work on offer for translators rarely remains faithful to a particular topic. We need to be widely adaptable because these are the real demands made of us by the market.

Literal translation

To demand that a person provide a “literal” or “word-for-word” translation is to ask the impossible because there is generally no such thing. Strings of words generated by reference to dictionaries are no sort of translation at all, and if they tell you anything it is simply about the economics of dictionary publishing. A translation is only as good as the degree to which it manages to bring to life in the target language the way text or speech lived in the original. Lists of probable semantic equivalence are no more than the corpse of a text or utterance.

Text and speech carry with them a lot of information that cannot be explained by reference to the individual words that make them up, and of the two types of information it is this non-textual information that is most critical to the speakers and listeners, or to the authors and readers of a particular speech or text. To attempt to strip this away, leaving only the semantic equivalents as measured with a dictionary, is to deprive them of all the information most germane to the translation.

The idea of “word-for-word” translation or interpreting is quite absurd on the most fundamental grounds. In even the most straightforward translation of a non-idiomatic text, in any language pair, words will disappear and sprout, some phrases will be condensed, others will serve where one word sufficed in the original, sentences will be divided and merged. If there was one word in each foreign language for each word in English, they wouldn't be foreign languages at all: they would be codes, and we would be able to have everything translated by a calculator.

Back translation

There is sometimes the expectation that by translating a translation back into the original language some indication may be given of the quality of the first translation, and that sins committed by the first translator will become visible.

This is a gross error. It shows nothing and in certain circumstances can be highly misleading. If, for example, there arises some discrepancy between the original and the back-translation, who is to say whether the accuracy was lost on the way out or on the way back?

If the person doing the back translation has not seen the original it will be virtually impossible for them to settle on precisely the same wording as the original. This is because all languages admit considerable flexibility in choice of word, flexibility that is only tempered by a thorough knowledge of the context. It is also irrelevant because there are more important yardsticks by which translation ought to be judged successful or not, such as accuracy of factual content, equivalence in terms of style, register and naturalness etc. In a good translation these will all be satisfied, thanks to the subtle choices made by the translator within that margin of flexibility. Yet they will all be tossed aside if the expectation that “good translations come with an undo button” is allowed to prevail.

If comment on the quality of a translation is sought from another translator you are advised to have them prepare written comments that explain in metalinguistic terms (that is without relying on quotes from the texts) precisely where the translation fails in terms of accuracy, style, register and so on. Their explanation should be persuasive and should not depend on their facility in the second language.