

INTERPRETING & TRANSLATING:

13 Differences that Explain Why Interpreting is the Ultimate Language Skill



1 Interpreting is the oral rendering of heard speech (often performed at the same time as the original is being delivered).

Translation is the written presentation of a text in a different target language from the source, provided at a later time.

2 Outside references (dictionaries, glossaries etc.) can (and should) be used for translating; they are however useless when interpreting, because there is no time in which to look up any unknown terms.

The interpreter either knows and is able to convey the relevant content, or is not. There is nothing in-between.

3 From the above comment, one can instantly tell that there is no need for preparation in advance before translating a text. One just uses reference tools and works through as needed.

However, preparation in advance for the topic of an interpreting session is absolutely vital, and for that purpose, advance copies of draft speeches, names of participants, glossaries of specialist terms and the like are essential tools.

4 Apart from deadlines (sometimes imposed by clients without good reason) there are no serious timing issues involved in translating work, and it can be performed at leisure with no serious impact upon the eventual readers.

The opposite is true when interpreting: regardless of whether in consecutive or simultaneous mode, only a few seconds of lag between the original speech and the rendition in the target language are acceptable for listeners.

5 Cognitive load issues simply do not apply to translations. Each item can be considered individually and there is no need for multi-tasking.

The opposite is true for interpreters, who are required to do the following all at the same time:

- a) Listen to the source speech
- b) Analyse the structure and accurately render the content in the target language
- c) Read and can comprehend any slides or other items projected for the audience
- d) Handle communications with audio technicians and / or event hosts /clients
- e) Communicate with the (booth or virtual) partner about handovers, names, vocabulary issues, breaks etc.

The consequences can be severe for interpreters, especially in remote simultaneous mode where many of the above have to be handled using discreet items of equipment, and can lead to premature mental exhaustion with corresponding drop of quality unless shorter handovers between colleagues are arranged.

Stamina is also a grave issue in remote mode: very few colleagues are even able to handle remote sessions that last more than one half day (3-3.5 hours).

6 All professions have inherent health risks: for translators they can involve ergonomic issues because of poor seating posture and possibly, in the case of enormous throughput, some form of repetitive strain injury. In both cases rest and treatment are possible.

Interpreters however, face altogether more grave threats to their continuing professional activity: especially in remote working, acoustic shock (where extraneous noise is amplified excessively because of equipment malfunction) has become a real issue and has resulted in burst eardrums and thus lifelong deafness (career-ending) to several interpreters in the last year in particular.

7 Once interpreting is done, the service is complete: proofing etc. may be applied after for translations

8 Language knowledge demands are not so high for translators – and can be covered by dictionaries, or spellcheckers etc. Accents and imperfect expression much less tolerated for interpreters.

9 Levels of skill much lower for translating – interpreting since has to be right first time & cannot be faked.

10 Translation memory tools and machine translation can help translators – no such computer assistance for interpreting exists (or is likely to exist in the foreseeable future?).

It should be stated that transcriptions exist (which can be machine translated) but they are not fast enough to be of any real use.

11 Competition on price is more or less acceptable for translation – but extremely unwise for interpreting.

12 The global pool of translators is estimated at est. at 640 thousand worldwide (per UTS). The pool of interpreters is much smaller: estimates are approximately 6-7 thousand professionals in total, across the entire globe!

13 Translation agencies organise the translation, timing, planning and execution (including checking and proofreading) for a justified uplift over cost of on average 50%.

Interpreter agencies hire interpreters for events for similar uplifts on cost: this is more difficult to justify.

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