

It is highly likely that you have heard of interpreters and translators but you might think that they both do the same thing. After all, they both work with languages, but in reality the two jobs are completely different. Essentially, interpreters work with the spoken word while translators work with written content. Although it is easy to see why you might consider them to be the same, they both require a completely different set of skills. In this article we will examine the differences between the two.

Interpreters

The aim of interpreting is to verbally render information from one language (the 'source' language) into another (the 'target' language). They are often required in instances where people who speak different languages are meeting. There are a number of different 'types' of interpreting, including:

Face to face interpreting occurs in a specific location, often a public service location (for instance, a hospital or court), a home or within a business' premises. The client/ Service Provider (doctor or police officer), the Limited English Speaker(s) (LES) / Service User and the interpreter are all present in the same location. Face to face interpreting can be either consecutive or carried out via the following:

Telephone interpreting is completed remotely with the interpreter joining a conversation via a telephone. Often the client and LES are together in a physical location (e.g., a hospital or Job Centre) while the interpreter is at home, or in a call centre. Telephone interpreting is always consecutive (see below).

Video remote interpreting is also completed remotely with the interpreter joining the conversation via a secure Internet video link. In most cases the client and LES are in the same location (e.g., a police station) and the interpreter joins either from home, or from a centralised client or LSP location specifically for that purpose.

There are several modes of interpreting that the interpreter may master for use in different situations. The more modes an interpreter is competent in, the greater the variety of assignments they can complete. If you wish to acquire an interpreting qualification, the higher the level you choose, the more modes you will have to demonstrate.

The first mode that interpreters generally learn is consecutive interpreting. This is required for nearly all interpreting assignments. Consecutive interpreting is the practice of breaking a speech into sections, and pausing the speech whilst each section is interpreted.

Next is sight translation from English, which is the next most common. Sight translation is the oral rendition of text written in one language into another language.

Simultaneous interpreting is one of the most difficult skills to learn and is often used in specific locations, such as a courtroom, during a conference, or in mental health interpreting assignments. Simultaneous interpreting requires the interpreter to interpret what the speaker is saying whilst they are talking, so there are no pauses in the speech.

Finally, written translation to and from English, is most often used in court assignments. While strictly speaking this is translation and not interpreting, it is a skill that certain interpreters need to use.

Interpreters By Specialism

Along with the different methods of interpreting, there are also many different specialisms in which interpreters work. Some of the more common are:

Medical Interpreters - This is considered to be one of the most vital forms of interpreting as it has to be accurate and correct as it has a direct impact on someone's health. Interpreters are used for all types of medical appointments, including those that are literally a matter of life or death. Having a qualified interpreter is sometimes the only way that patients and doctors can communicate effectively so that patients can get the help that they need.

Legal Interpreters - They will have a solid understanding of judiciary vocabulary and will be used in courtrooms, police stations, prisons and other places where legal matters are discussed between people who speak different languages. Legal interpreting is one of the most difficult specialisms that there is and only the most highly qualified interpreters should undertake it.

Conference Interpreters - Conferences can see people from around the world come together in one place, so teams of interpreters are needed. Interpreters who work at conferences utilise interpreting booths around the

circumference of the room and will communicate with delegates through the use of audio equipment (microphones and earpieces) while simultaneously interpreting what the speaker is saying.

Community Interpreters - This is a wide category but it includes any interpreting that might take place in the community. This category includes medical, job centres, social services, housing departments, education and much more.

Public Service Interpreters - another term that means more or less the same as community interpreters and will interpret for different public services including those already mentioned. However, often 'Public Service Interpreter' is a term used to denote an interpreter with the '[Level 6 Diploma in Public Service Interpreting](#)' and is eligible to interpret in legal situations.

If you would like to become an interpreter, the best starting point is with a [Level 3 Certificate in Community Interpreting](#)

Translators

The primary difference between interpreting and translating is that translation involves working with written content. One of the main differences between the two roles is that translators often have more time to conduct research while completing their work, although they will still have to work to tight deadlines. While reading and writing are completely different from listening and speaking, the aim of both translating and interpreting is to make sure that the meaning of the message is conveyed as accurately as possible.

Translation is mainly carried out by humans, but technology has evolved and the majority of business translation is completed with the aid of Computer-Aided Translation (CAT) Tools. Broadly speaking, the different methods of translation are:

Human Translation - As expected, this is where an entire translation is completed by a qualified translator. They will still have certain resources that they rely on such as bilingual dictionaries and glossaries, but the translation will be crafted by a person using their brainpower.

Machine Translation - This involves a computer taking care of the work and in recent years, technology has improved considerably. However, machine translation still has issues as the technology used does not fully

understand the nuances of language and therefore will often produce texts that have errors and/or are difficult to understand.

Hybrid Translation - It is now common for translators and computers to work side by side. This will involve text being fed into a CAT tool, then checked by a translator to ensure it reads well. This method can save translators time and increase consistency but in contrast, it can also make the work harder if complex texts are used that include technical terminology and double meanings.

Translators By Specialism

Translators usually work in one or more specialist areas. There are two broad categories: literary translators and informative translators.

Literary Translators - They are often used for novels, short stories, essays and other types of creative writing.

This kind of translation comes with certain challenges because the form that the writing takes is just as crucial as the actual content. As a result, the translator needs to identify the style of the writer along with the words that they choose and render both of them as accurately as possible.

Literary translators have to begin with the thinking that a perfect translation does not exist. Following this, they then have to determine which elements of the original text should be preserved. What this means is that two literary translators will never create the same translation as the end result is largely based on the opinion of the translator.

Informative Translators - Literary translation often gains more attention but informative translation makes up the majority of translation work that is available. The aim of informative translation is to ensure that the text, meaning and message are clear when rendered from one language into another. Literary style is less of a concern (although still important in some specialisms such as marketing) but the task is still one that is highly complex.

There are a large number of specialisms in which translators work including:

Judicial Translation - This involves the translation of legal documents such as court proceedings, marriage licences and Wills.

Legal Translation - Any legal content that sits outside of a judicial setting. This could include law school textbooks and law manuals. While it does have a link to judicial translation, the two are often considered to be separate.

Medical Translation - An exceptional level of accuracy is required here as translators will work on clinical trial reports, medical paperwork and prescription information.

Scientific Translation - This will involve the translation of all kinds of scientific writing, making this category extremely wide-reaching.

Financial Translation - From banking documentation to tax forms and all other documentation that relates to finances and money.

Technical Translation - Again, this can be a wide category but as an example it may include the translation of IT documentation, user manuals or engineering texts for those who work in these fields.

Essentially, translators are required across almost every industry. However, regardless of the industry, they will need to ensure that information is conveyed correctly and that they use best practices across all of the work they complete.

The Skills That Translators and Interpreters Require

So, it is clear to see that interpreters will work orally, while translators will carry out their work in writing. Although language ability is a common skill needed in both roles, the skills needed for the two roles are often quite different. To be a translator you would need to be proficient in reading comprehension, transfer and target language productions skills, along with needing to be able to work efficiently with Computer Aided Translation (CAT) tools, while interpreters need excellent listening skills, a high level of spoken ability, clear pronunciation in both languages, an excellent memory and the ability to think and speak in two languages at the same time.

You can read more about interpreting skills in our blog [How to Improve Your Consecutive Interpreting Skills](#).

Conclusion

There is an element of overlap when it comes to translators and interpreters. However, there are clear differences between the two roles as

well, meaning in most cases an individual will work as either a translator or an interpreter and there are different requirements in terms of qualifications and experience for paid work opportunities.

At Learn Q, we are experts in all aspects of interpreting, so get in touch so that we can help you gain a valuable qualification with the minimum of fuss.