

Ови стручњаци  
за стране језике  
доприносе  
комуницирању,  
реч по реч.



• • “These language  
• experts promote  
• communication,  
• one word at a time.”



# Interpreters a

by Elka Jones

**L**inguaphiles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can choose from an expanding selection of occupations. Among them are interpreters of spoken and signed language and translators of written language. These highly skilled workers enable the cross-cultural communication necessary in today’s society.

What skills do interpreters and translators need? For starters, knowing at least two languages is a prerequisite. But it takes more than bilingualism to succeed in these occupations. On the following pages, you’ll learn about the work of interpreters and translators, including what they do, where they work, how much they earn, and how they prepare for these careers.

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**Defining the profession**  
Interpreters and translators convert one language into another. But they do more than simply translate words—they relay concepts and ideas between languages. They must thoroughly understand the subject matters in which they work so they are able to convert information from one language, known as the source language, into another, the target language. And they must remain sensitive to the cultures associated with their languages of expertise.

**Same goal, different methods**  
Interpreters and translators are often discussed together, as they are in this article, because they share some common traits. For example, both need a special ability, known as language combination. This ability enables them to be fluent in at least two languages: a native, or active, language and a secondary, or passive, language. Their active language is the one they know best and

into which they interpret or translate, and their passive language is one of which they have near-perfect knowledge.  
Although some people do both, interpretation and translation are different professions. Each requires a distinct set of skills and aptitudes, and most people are better suited for one or the other. While interpreters often work into and from both languages, translators generally work only into their active language.

**Interpreters.** Interpreters convert one spoken language into another—or, in the case of sign language interpreters, between spoken communication and signed language. This requires interpreters to pay attention carefully, understand what is communicated in both languages, and express thoughts and ideas clearly. Strong research and analytical skills, mental dexterity, and an exceptional memory also are important.

The first part of an interpreter’s work begins before he or she arrives at the



These language experts

*Questi esperti di lingua*

promote communication,

*promuovono la comunicazione,*

one word at a time.

*parola per parola.*

# nd Translators

jobsite. The interpreter must become familiar with the subject matter the speakers will cover, a task that may involve research to create a list of common words and phrases associated with the topic. Next, the interpreter usually travels to the location where his or her services are needed. Physical presence may not be required for some work, such as telephone interpretation. But it is usually important that the interpreter sees the communicators in order to hear and observe the person speaking and to relay the message to the other party.

There are two types of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. Simultaneous interpretation requires interpreters to listen and speak (or sign) at the same time. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter begins to convey a sentence being spoken while the speaker is still talking. Ideally, simultaneous interpreters should be so familiar with a subject that they are able to anticipate the end of the

speaker's sentence. Because they need a high degree of concentration, simultaneous interpreters work in pairs, with each interpreting for 20- to 30-minute segments. This type of interpretation is required at international conferences and is sometimes used in the courts.

In contrast to simultaneous interpretation's immediacy, consecutive interpretation begins only after the speaker has verbalized a group of words or sentences. Consecutive interpreters often take notes while listening to the speakers, so they must develop some type of note-taking or shorthand system. This form of interpretation is used most often for person-to-person communication, during which the interpreter sits near both parties.

**Translators.** Translators convert written materials from one language into another. They must have excellent writing and analytical ability. And because the documents they translate must be as flawless as possible, they also

need good editing skills.

Translators' assignments may vary in length, writing style, and subject matter. When they first receive text to convert into another language, translators usually read it in its entirety to get an idea of the subject. Next, they identify and look up any unfamiliar words. Translators also might do additional reading on the subject matter if they are unclear about anything in the text. However, they also consult with the text's originator or issuing agency to clarify unclear or unfamiliar ideas, words, or acronyms.

Translating involves more than replacing a word with its equivalent in another language: sentences and ideas must be manipulated to flow with the same coherence as the source document so that the translation reads as though it originated in the target language. In addition, translators also must bear in mind any cultural references that may need to be explained to the intended audience, such as colloquialisms, slang,

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and other expressions that do not translate literally. Some subjects may be more difficult than others to translate because words or passages may have multiple meanings that make several translations possible. Not surprisingly, translated work often goes through multiple revisions before final text is submitted.

## Specialty areas

The services of interpreters and translators are needed in a number of subject areas. While they may not completely specialize in a particular field or industry, many interpreters and translators focus on one area of expertise. Some of the most common areas are described below; however, people in these occupations also may work in a variety of other areas, including finance, insurance, social services, or entertainment.

**Conference interpreters.** As the name suggests, these interpreters work at conferences that include non-English-speaking attendees. This work includes international business and diplomacy, although conference interpreters also

may interpret for any organization that works with foreign language speakers. Employers prefer high-level interpreters who have at least two language combinations—for example, the ability to translate from English to French and English to Spanish. For some positions, such as those with the United Nations, this qualification is mandatory.

Much of the interpreting performed at conferences is simultaneous; however, at some meetings with a small number of attendees, consecutive interpreting also may be used. Usually, interpreters sit in soundproof booths, listening to the speakers through headphones and interpreting into a microphone what is said. The interpreted speech is then relayed to the listener through headsets. When interpreting is needed for only one or two people, the *chuchotage*, or *whispering*, method may be used. The interpreter sits behind or next to the attendee and whispers a translation of the proceedings.

Conference interpreters generally start with lower profile assignments and work their way to higher profile ones. At each



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level, it is important that interpreters be knowledgeable about the conference's subject matter. Many international organizations choose to hire people locally to reduce costs. For this reason, the location from which a conference interpreter works may be an important factor in employment prospects. In addition to work contracted from service-providing agencies, other employers of this specialty include the U.S. Department of State, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization of American States. Employment options outside of government and finance include non-governmental organizations, grassroots organizations, and labor unions.

**Guide or escort interpreters.** Guide or escort interpreters accompany either U.S. visitors abroad or foreign visitors in the United States to ensure that they are able to communicate during their stay. These specialists interpret on a variety of subjects, both on an informal basis and on a professional level. Most of their interpretation is consecutive, and work is generally shared by two interpreters when the assignment requires more than an 8-hour day. Frequent travel, often for days or weeks at a time, is common, a factor that some find particularly appealing.

**Judiciary interpreters and translators.** The job of judiciary interpreters and translators is to help people appearing in court who are unable or unwilling to communicate in English. Court interpreters work in a variety of legal settings, such as attorney-client meetings, preliminary hearings, depositions, trials, and arraignments. Legal translators must have a thorough familiarity with the language and functions of the U.S. judicial system.

This type of work can be challenging because of the emotional or graphic nature of some cases. Court interpreters face the difficult tasks of remaining

detached from the contents and not altering or modifying the meaning or tone of what is said. Success as a court interpreter requires an understanding of both legal terminology and colloquial language. In addition to interpreting what is said, court interpreters also may be required to translate written documents and read them aloud.

**Literary translators.** These translators adapt written literature from one language into another. They may translate any number of documents, including journal articles, books, poetry, and short stories. Literary translation is related to creative writing; literary translators must create a new text in the target language that reproduces the content and style of the original. Whenever possible, literary translators work closely with authors in order to best capture their intended meanings and literary characteristics.

This type of work often is done as a sideline by university professors; however, opportunities exist for well-established literary translators. As is the case with writers, finding a publisher is a critical part of the job. Most aspiring literary translators begin by submitting a short sample of their work in the hope that it will be printed and give them recognition. For example, after receiving permission from the author, they might submit to a publishing house a previously unpublished short work, such as a poem or essay.

**Localization.** Translators who work in localization are part of a relatively recent and rapidly expanding specialty. Localization involves the complete adaptation of a product for use in a different language and culture. At its earlier stages, this work dealt primarily with software localization, but the specialty has expanded to include the adaptation of Web sites and products in manufacturing and other business sectors.

Translators working in localization need a solid grasp of the languages to be translated, a thorough understanding of technical concepts and vocabulary, and a high degree of knowledge about the intended target audience or users of the product. The goal of these specialists is that the product appear as if it is originally manufactured in the country in which it will be sold and supported. Because software programming often is involved, it is not uncommon for people who work in this area of translation to have a high-tech background.

**Medical interpreters and translators.** Providing language services to healthcare patients with limited English proficiency is the realm of medical interpreters and translators. Medical interpreters help patients communicate with doctors, nurses, and other medical staff. Translators working in this specialty primarily convert patient materials and informational brochures, issued by hospitals and medical facilities, into the desired language.

The majority of medical interpreters work in hospitals and medical centers. Although most of these workers freelance, the number of full- and part-time staff positions is steadily growing as more hospitals establish and expand interpreter services departments. Medical interpreters need a strong grasp of medical and colloquial terminology in both languages, along with cultural sensitivity regarding how the patient receives the information. They must remain detached but aware of the patient's sensitivities and pain.

**Sign language interpreters.** Sign language interpreters facilitate communication between people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and people who can hear. Sign language interpreters must be fluent in English and American Sign Language (ASL), which combines

signing, finger spelling, and specific body language. ASL has its own grammatical rules, sentence structure, idioms, historical contexts, and cultural nuances. Sign language interpreting, like foreign language interpreting, involves more than simply replacing a word of spoken English with a sign representing that word.

Most sign language interpreters either interpret, aiding communication between English and ASL, or transliterate, facilitating communication between English and contact signing—a form of signing that uses a more English-language based word order. Some interpreters specialize in oral interpreting for deaf or hard-of-hearing persons who lipread instead of sign. Other specialty areas are tactile signing, interpreting for persons who are deaf-blind; cued speech; and signing exact English.

A significant number of full-time positions for sign language interpreters are in school districts. Other typical settings include healthcare, legal, postsecondary education, employment, businesses, and government agencies.

### Employment and outlook

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data indicate that interpreters and translators held about 22,000 jobs in 2000. Because of the large number of people who work in the occupation sporadically, however, the actual number of interpreters and translators is probably significantly higher. Reflecting the diversity of employment options in the field, the industries employing most salaried interpreters and translators include educational services; business services; health services; communications; local government, except education and hospitals; social services; printing and publishing; chemicals and allied products; State government, except education

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and hospitals; and Federal Government, excluding the Postal Service.

Employment in the occupation is expected to increase steadily as most of these industries expand. A growth rate of about 24 percent is projected for the occupation over the 2000-10 decade—faster than the average for all occupations. In addition to overall growth in the industries employing interpreters and translators, higher demand is expected to result from increased international ties and increased numbers of foreign language speakers in the United States. Both of these trends are expected to continue, according to data from the World Trade Organization and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Translators are most in demand for the languages referred to as “PFIGS”—Portuguese, French, Italian, German, and Spanish—and the principal Asian languages—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Current events and changing political environments, often difficult to foresee, sometimes increase the need for other languages.

The way translators do their jobs has changed with advancements in technology. Nearly all translation work is done on a computer, and most assignments are received and submitted electronically. This enables translators to work from almost anywhere, and a large percentage of them work from home. The Internet provides advanced research capabilities and valuable language resources, such as specialized dictionaries and glossaries. In some cases, use of machine-assisted

translation—including memory tools that provide comparisons of previous translations with current work—helps save time and reduce repetition. However, technology is not likely to have a negative impact on employment of interpreters and translators because such innovations are incapable of producing work comparable with that of live professionals.

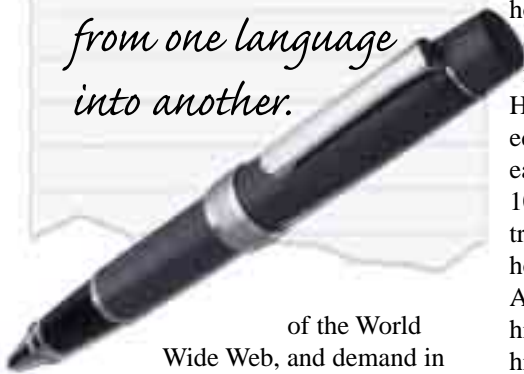
Urban areas, especially those in California, New York, and Washington, DC, provide the largest numbers of employment possibilities, especially for interpreters; however, as the immigrant population spreads into more rural areas, jobs in smaller communities will become more widely available.

While some interpreters and translators work in-house for a company or organization, most are self-employed. To find work, interpreters and translators may submit resumes to 100 or more agencies and then wait to be contacted when an agency matches their skills with a job. After establishing a few regular clients, interpreters and translators often hear of subsequent jobs by word of mouth; or, they may receive enough work from a few clients to stay busy. Many who freelance in the occupation work only part time, relying on other sources of income to supplement earnings from interpreting or translation.

Job prospects are expected to be best for highly skilled interpreters and translators who have specialized knowledge. In particular, demand for localization, driven by exports and the expansion

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*Translators convert written materials from one language into another.*



of the World Wide Web, and demand in other technical areas, such as engineering or law, is expected to be high. Employment growth in the healthcare industry will be fueled by the need to comply with relatively recent guidelines regarding compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which requires all healthcare providers receiving Federal aid to provide language services to non-English speakers. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws, such as the Rehabilitation Act, mandate that in certain situations, an interpreter must be available for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Given the lack of qualified candidates meeting these requirements, interpreters for the deaf will continue to have favorable employment prospects.

Minimal growth is expected for both conference interpreters and literary translators. Still, experts say knowledge about the world is of utmost importance for interpreters and translators of all

specialties. Linguistic aptitude is presupposed, experts say, but practical knowledge helps people remain competitive.

### Two versions of the occupation

As with any profession, interpreters and translators face both positive and negative aspects of their jobs. One of the positives is earnings. BLS data show that interpreters and translators had median hourly earnings of \$15 in 2000, the equivalent of about \$31,110 annually for salaried interpreters and translators. However, candidates with additional education and experience can potentially earn significantly more. The highest paid 10 percent of salaried interpreters and translators earned more than \$25 an hour, according to the same BLS data. And limited information suggests that high-level conference interpreters and high-quality interpreters and translators working full time in some specialized technical fields can make more than \$100,000 annually.

Many interpreters and translators find their work rewarding and educationally enriching. People in these occupations provide a valuable service and, at the same time, gain valuable knowledge about subject areas that may lead to future career opportunities. The occupation also offers variety and flexibility, allowing many workers to choose which jobs to accept or decline.

On the other hand, some find freelancing difficult because of the amount of time that must be dedicated to looking for jobs. In addition, freelancers must manage their own finances, and payment for services may not always be prompt. And there are no employer-paid benefits. Interpreters and translators also report that their work can be stressful and exhausting and that translation can be lonesome or dull. Schedules are often

erratic, too, with extensive periods of no work interspersed with others requiring long, irregular hours.

However, most interpreters and translators use their irregular schedules to pursue other interests, such as traveling, dabbling in a hobby, or working a second job. Many workers in these occupations say they enjoy what they do and value the ability to control their schedules and workloads.

### Preparing for a career

The educational backgrounds of interpreters and translators vary. Knowing a language in addition to a native language is a given. Although it is not necessary to have been raised bilingual to succeed, many interpreters and translators grew up speaking two languages.

One way to decide if you might like these careers is to try a simplified version of the work. For translation, practice putting a foreign text into your native language. For interpretation, get a feel for the occupation by listening and watching something on television, such as the evening news, while taking notes of what is said. Then see if you can repeat in that same language the exact message and content.

In high school, students can begin to prepare for these careers by taking a broad range of courses that include English writing and comprehension, foreign languages, and basic computer proficiency. Other helpful pursuits include spending time abroad or comparable forms of direct contact with foreign cultures and extensive reading on a variety of subjects in English and at least one other language.

Beyond high school, there are many educational options. Although a bachelor's degree is almost always required, interpreters and translators note

that it is acceptable to major in something other than a language. However, specialized training in how to do the work is generally required. A number of formal programs in interpreting and translation are available at colleges nationwide and through nonuniversity training programs, conferences, and courses. Many people who work as conference interpreters or in more technical areas—such as localization, engineering, or finance—have master’s degrees, while those working in the community as court or medical interpreters or translators are more likely to have completed job-specific training programs.

There is currently no universal form of certification required of all interpreters and translators in the United States, but there are a variety of different tests workers can take to demonstrate proficiency. The American Translators Association provides accreditation in more than 30 language combinations for its members; other options include a certification program offered by the Translators and Interpreters Guild. Many interpreters are not certified. Federal courts have certification for Spanish,

Navaho, and Haitian Creole interpreters, and many State and municipal courts offer their own forms of certification.

The U.S. Department of State has a three-test series for interpreters, including simple consecutive interpreting (escort), simultaneous interpreting (court/seminar), and conference-level interpreting (international conferences). These tests are not referred to directly as certification, but successful completion often indicates that a person has an adequate level of skill to work in the field.

Both the National Association of the Deaf and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf offer certification for sign interpreters and have recently collaborated to develop a joint exam.

Experience is an essential part of a successful career in either interpreting or translation. In fact, many agencies or companies use only the services of people who have worked in the field for 3 to 5 years or have a degree in translation studies or both. A good way for translators to learn firsthand about the profession is to start working in-house for a company; however, such jobs are not very numerous.

Advice for new entrants to the field is to begin getting experience whatever way they can—even if it means doing informal or unpaid work. Mentoring relationships and internships are other ways to build skills and confidence. Escort interpreting may offer an opportunity for inexperienced candidates to work alongside a more seasoned interpreter. Interpreters might also find it easier to break into areas with particularly high demand for language services, such as court or medical interpretation.

### For more information

To learn more about careers in interpretation and translation, visit your local library. Look for books, periodicals, and other resources related to these occupations. Check with your school counselor for more sources of information. You also may want to contact your local hospital or courthouse and ask about the language services division.

Organizations dedicated to these professions also can provide valuable advice and guidance for people interested in learning more. For career and

**Esperam-se melhores perspectivas de emprego para os intérpretes e os tradutores altamente qualificados com conhecimentos especializados.**



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- expected to be best for
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- and translators who have
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other information, write, call, or visit the Web sites of the organizations listed below:

American Translators Association  
225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 683-6100  
[www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)

Translators and Interpreters Guild  
8611 Second Ave., Suite 203  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
1 (800) 992-0367  
(301) 563-6450  
[www.ttig.org](http://www.ttig.org)

U.S. Department of State  
Office of Language Services  
Room 2212  
Washington, DC 20520-2204  
(202) 647-3492

For more detailed information by specialty, contact the association affiliated with that subject area:

**Conference interpretation**  
International Association of Conference Interpreters  
10 Avenue de Sécheron-CH 1202  
Geneva, Switzerland  
[www.aiic.net](http://www.aiic.net)

**Court interpretation and translation**  
National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators  
551 Fifth Ave., Suite 3025  
New York, NY 10176-3099  
(212) 692-9581  
[www.najit.org](http://www.najit.org)

**Literary translation**

American Literary Translators Association  
PO Box 830688  
Richardson, TX 75083-0688  
(972) 883-2093  
[www.literarytranslators.org](http://www.literarytranslators.org)

**Localization**

The Localisation Industry Standards Association  
7 Route du Monastère-CH-1173  
Féchy, Switzerland  
[www.lisa.org](http://www.lisa.org)

**Medical interpretation and translation**

Massachusetts Medical Interpreters Association  
New England Medical Center  
750 Washington St.  
NEMC Box 271  
Boston, MA 02111  
(617) 636-5479  
[www.mmia.org](http://www.mmia.org)

**Sign Language interpretation**

National Association of the Deaf  
814 Thayer Ave.  
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4500  
Voice: (301) 587-1788  
TTY: (301) 587-1789  
[www.nad.org](http://www.nad.org)

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf  
333 Commerce St.  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Voice: (703) 838-0030  
TTY: (703) 838-0459  
[www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)



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- ◆ Links to State occupational employment projections