



US Coast Guard Auxiliary Interpreter Corps

What does an Interpreter do?

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To explain what interpreters do it is worthwhile to start by discussing the differences between interpreting and translation.

Interpreting vs. Translation

On the surface, the difference between interpreting and translation is only the difference in the medium: the interpreter translates orally, while a translator interprets written text. Both interpreting and translation presuppose a certain love of language and deep knowledge of more than one tongue.

However, the differences in the training, skills, and talents needed for each job are vast. The key skill of a very good translator is the ability to write well, to express him/herself clearly in the target language. That is why professional translators almost always work in only one direction, translating only into their native language. Even bilingual individuals rarely can express themselves in a given subject equally well in two languages. And many excellent translators are far from being bilingual - they may not be, and need not be, fluent speakers of the source language (the language of the original text being translated). The key skills of the translator are the ability to understand the source language and the culture of the country where the text originated, and, using a good library of dictionaries and reference materials, renders that material into the target language.

Forms of interpreting

An interpreter, on the other hand, has to be able to translate in both directions, without the use of any dictionaries, on the spot. There are two types of interpreting: consecutive and simultaneous. In the most popular form of simultaneous interpreting the interpreter

sits in a booth wearing a pair of headphones and speaking into a microphone. Strictly speaking, "simultaneous" is a misnomer: the interpreter can't start interpreting until s/he understands the general meaning of the sentence. Depending on how far in the sentence the subject and the verb are located, the interpreter into English may not be able to utter a single word until s/he heard the very end of the sentence in the source language! This should make it evident how hard the task of the interpreter really is: s/he needs to be translating the sentence into the target language while simultaneously listening to and comprehending the next sentence. You can experience the difficulty of the task even if you are monolingual: just try paraphrasing someone's speech with a half-sentence delay, making sure you understand the next sentence while paraphrasing the previous one. One of the key skills of the simultaneous interpreter is decisiveness: there is simply no time to weigh the merits of variant translations or to recall just the right idiom in the target language. Any delay and you may lose a few words (and possibly a thought) that the speaker uttered. And since the speaker may be far away, or even in a different room than the interpreter, the loss may be permanent.

During consecutive interpreting the speaker stops every 1-5 minutes (usually at the end of every "paragraph" or a complete thought) and the interpreter then steps in to render what was said into the target language. A key skill involved in consecutive interpreting is note taking, since few interpreters can memorize a full paragraph at a time without loss of detail. But interpreter's notes are very different from those of a stenographer, because writing down words in the source language makes interpreter's job harder when he or she has to translate the speech into the target language. Many professional interpreters develop their own "ideogramic" symbology, which allows them to take down not the words, but the thoughts of the speaker in language-independent form. Then the interpreter's output is more idiomatic and less source language bound.

In spite of the vast differences in the skills of translators and interpreters, there is one thing that they must share, besides deep knowledge of both languages: they must understand the subject matter of the text or speech they are translating. One of the main reasons why the Automatic Translation projects that were popular since 1950's failed is precisely that reason. Translation is not a matter of substituting words in one language for words in another. It is a matter of understanding the thought expressed in one language and then explaining it using the resources of another language. In other words, what an interpreter does is change words into meaning, and then change meaning back into words -- of a different language. So interpreting is basically paraphrasing. And just like you can't explain to someone a thought if you didn't fully understand that thought, nor can you translate or interpret something without mastery of the subject matter being relayed. This is why making sure that the interpreter is knowledgeable in the subject matter of the conference or the workshop they are interpreting at is just as important as making sure that s/he is an experienced interpreter.

Qualifications of a good interpreter:

- Knowledge of the general subject of the speeches that are to be interpreted.
- General erudition and intimate familiarity with both cultures.

- Extensive vocabulary in both languages.
- Ability to express thoughts clearly and concisely in both languages.
- Excellent note-taking technique for consecutive interpreting.
- At least 2-3 years of booth experience for simultaneous interpreting.
- USCG/Auxiliary operational and other qualifications will be considered.

US Coast Guard Auxiliary Interpreter Corps – Competency Levels

Level “A” fluently reads, writes, speaks and understands a foreign language in addition to English.

Level “B” speaks and understands a foreign language in addition to English, but does not necessarily fluently read or write in any language.