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ABSTRACT

Translation skills require the ability to interpret information from a source language into the native tongue without distortion of emotional or written content. A broad knowledge of several subject areas, plus schooling in a special translator-training program, are prerequisites for a career in translation. Nonliterary translation offers the most financial stability, with positions available in the federal government, United Nations, and international agencies. Though some private industries hire translators, most utilize the skills of bilingual employees or hire a freelancer and pay them by the number of words translated. A knowledge of Russian, German, Japanese, French, and Spanish is in greatest demand with an increasing need for a knowledge of Chinese, Arabic, and Portuguese. Names and addresses of nine translation associations/societies are included. (JW)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAREERS: TRANSLATION. Q&A.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

Prepared by Jeanne Rennie

FL_014004

Foreign Language Careers: TRANSLATION

Prepared by *Jeanne Rennie*

What skills do translators need?

The essential task of translators is to transfer written information from one language to another. In doing so, they must distort that information as little as possible. The translation must not only convey the same message as the original text, but also convey the emotional content and writing style of the original. The personal writing style of translators should not be apparent in the translation.

Perhaps the most obvious skill that translators need is the ability to read and understand a second language. With very few exceptions, translators translate material *from* the source language *into* their native tongue. To translate information into English, translators' ability to write English must be well above that of the average native English speaker. Translators must be capable of expressing, in English, ideas that someone else has formulated in the source language. That is a far more difficult task than expressing one's own ideas. Whereas most foreign language students are taught to "think in the language," translators must be able to receive ideas in one language and express them in another.

In addition to knowing a second language, translators need to know as much as possible about as many things as possible. The demand for translators in any given field is rarely great enough to provide full-time work. Therefore, translators must be capable of doing competent translations in several subject areas. They should have one or two broad areas of knowledge (the equivalent of an undergraduate major or minor) and should be familiar with the technical jargon of many fields. Equally important is their ability to recognize what they do not yet know and to know where to find it. They also need a thorough knowledge of the "tools of the trade" (dictionaries, encyclopedias, reference books, catalogs, bibliographies), where to find them, and how to use them. The ability to do this kind of research is vital.

Is special training necessary?

In the past, translators have had no formal preparation for their career. However, it cannot be assumed that an individual who can speak, understand, read, and write a foreign language is capable of translating, from or into that language, articles on topics in banking, chemistry, engineering, law, and the like. The specialized vocabulary of

these fields is unfamiliar even to most native speakers of the language.

According to the American Translators Association's guidelines for translator training, a college student who wants to prepare for a career in translation should choose the following kinds of courses:

- a. Courses that provide an extensive knowledge of, and ability to reason in, the subject matter of the translation: mathematics, pure sciences, social sciences, history, business administration, economics.
- b. Courses that provide a sound reading knowledge and grasp of the language(s) from which one will be translating: four years of a major language, two years of a minor language; as many *basic* language courses as possible; at least two years of Latin.
- c. Courses that provide the ability to express oneself in lucid and straightforward English: writing courses, including one in newspaper writing and one in technical writing.

Individuals who plan to pursue a career in translation should read as much as possible in the language from which they will be translating: newspapers, magazines, catalogs, advertisements, and other kinds of general material. They should also read material in the specific subject area(s) with which they want to work. It is important that they know what is going on in the field and that they learn the jargon.

Are there special training programs?

There are special translator-training programs at some U.S. universities. Georgetown University (Washington, DC) and the Monterey (CA) Institute of Foreign Studies offer translator and interpreter (T&I) training in several languages. Stanford (CA) began a T&I program in the Department of German Studies in 1971, which it later extended to the Department of Slavic Studies. Carnegie-Mellon in Pittsburgh (PA) has T&I training in most European languages and Arabic, and the University of California at Santa Barbara has programs in German and French. A more complete list of schools offering translator training all over the world is included in the standard reference, *Translation & Translators: An International Directory and Guide*. (See "References" for specific information on this and other available materials.)

Where are the career opportunities?

The best opportunities for steady work and financial stability are in the field of nonliterary translation. The largest single employer of translators in this country is the federal government. The Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency are among the agencies which hire foreign language majors. However, the number of translators hired is very small, and prospects for employment with the federal government are not very good.

The United Nations also hires translators. U.N. translators must know two languages in addition to their native tongue. One of these three languages must be French. Starting salaries at the U.N. are higher than those in the federal government, although the difference in salaries for experienced translators is less significant.

International agencies which hire translators include the International Development Bank, the Telecommunications Satellite Organization, the Organization of American States, and the Pan-American Health Organization.

Private industries which make use of translators generally offer higher salaries than the government or national or international agencies. American companies which maintain a staff of at least one translator include Rockwell International, Kodak, John Deere Tractor, and Dow Chemical.

International banks, research laboratories, and chemical companies are among the industries which most frequently have staff translators. However, their translators are often required to know several languages.

A recent study of American businesses and service organizations showed that most of their translating needs are met by employees whose main job is in a non-language-related area. These employers view knowledge of a second language as a valuable *secondary* skill. If no appropriate staff are available, they hire freelance translators as needed. Freelance translators may be hired directly by the company or through a translation service company. The government, especially, has reduced its number of salaried translators by contracting translation work to translation service companies. The rates for government contract translations are often lower than experienced translators will accept.

Freelance translators are generally paid by the number of words either in the original text or the translation. Rates may vary from under \$20 per one thousand words to over \$100 per thousand words. Most translators hired directly by the client will be paid somewhere in the middle range. A good freelance translator can earn a good living and can also have a flexible work schedule.

Russian, German, Japanese, French, and Spanish are the languages most in demand. In addition, there is a growing

need for competent translators in Chinese, Arabic, and Portuguese. A translator would be wise to know one or more of the major languages, as well as one of the less-commonly-taught languages.

RESOURCES

American Literary Translators Association. Box 688, Mail Sta 1102, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX 75080.

American Society of Interpreters (ASI). 629 K Street NW, Suite 5117, Washington, DC 20006.

American Translators Association (ATA). Box 129, Croton-on-Hudson, NY 10520.

Association of Professional Translators (APT). c/o Josephine Thornton, Mellon Bank NA, International Department, 2432 Mellon Square, Pittsburgh, PA 15230.

Columbia University Translation Center. School of the Arts, Math 307A, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

Concordiat. Translation & Interpretation Department, Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, PO Box 1978, Monterey, CA 93940.

Inter-American Association of Translators (AIT). 1324 Jonquil Street NW, Washington, DC 20012.

PEN American Center Translation Committee. 47 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003.

The American Association of Language Specialists (TAALS). 1000 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036.

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