

- » Defining translation
- » Identifying translation in everyday interactions
- » Clearing up common misconceptions
- » Familiarizing yourself with key terms and concepts

Chapter **1**

Turning Your Attention to Translation

Translation enables communication in a multilingual world. If you want to read something that was written in an unfamiliar language, it has to be translated into a language you understand. Translation has been in practice for more than 2,000 years, and it's pervasive today in everything from books and product manuals to movies and advertising. Yet, few people understand what it is and what it takes to create a successful translation. It's not as simple as looking up words in a bilingual dictionary or pasting text into a translation app.

In this chapter, I explain what translation is and isn't and what it entails. I cover definitions of translation and their limitations, correct widespread misconceptions about translation, and introduce some of the basic terminology to get you started on your journey to becoming a translator.

Defining Translation

When you think about what translation is, you may surmise that it involves converting a text written in one language into another language. You may think it encompasses both spoken and written language. You may imagine a person

working on a computer at a desk surrounded by bilingual dictionaries. You may think of the people who work in booths at United Nations meetings and conferences. You may picture a situation in which a person is standing between two people who speak different languages and helping them communicate. You might even think about an app or a website you've used at some time to translate a word or phrase. Broadly conceived, translation can be all those things and more. In general, translation encompasses any means of converting verbal expression from one language to another.

The English word *translation* comes from the Latin *translatio*, which means to carry across or to bring across. For English speakers, *translation* deals with written materials, whereas *interpretation* is the process of translating speech from one language to another. However, people often confuse the two words and use the word *translator* to refer to both translators and interpreters. The people who work in the booths at the United Nations and help two individuals who don't speak a common language are interpreters. Translators are those who work with the written word.



REMEMBER

As you set out on your path to becoming a professional translator, maintain the distinction between the two terms. Refer to yourself as a translator if you translate written documents and as an interpreter if you focus on oral communication. Gently correct future clients and colleagues when, in the English-speaking context, they refer to translation as interpretation and interpreters as translators. While you, as the professional, may know what service and task those people have in mind, others may not. Knowing and advocating to call the services by their correct terms can avoid unnecessary confusion and service delays.



REMEMBER

Being a translator involves working in multilingual contexts. Keep in mind, however, that although many languages distinguish between translating and interpreting, some don't. As a professional, you'll need to rely on the context to determine which service is needed and to communicate clearly to everyone involved whether the situation calls for a translator or an interpreter.

Exploring traditional definitions

Translators read a text in one language and then write it in another language. The text that they write in the new language is called a *translation*. The word *translation* can be used to talk about three distinctly different things:

- » **A process:** The series of steps taken to convert a message written in one language into another language. The process involves reading, analysis, translation, revision, and editing. It often calls for research and may involve formatting, graphics, and other forms of communication.

- » **A product:** The end result of the translation process, which might be a book, brochure, legal document, movie script, or something else. You can think of the original text as the input and the translation as the output. For example, the Colombian-born, Nobel-Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014) wrote several novels in Spanish that were later translated into English and other languages.
- » **A phenomenon:** Translation can refer to a phenomenon — something that can be observed and studied. In the study of translation, you can examine the social and cultural factors that influence translators' choices, for example.

Practically speaking, as a translator, you're going to be most consciously involved with the first two items: process and product. You're going to be doing translation and creating translations. However, subconsciously, you'll also be actively involved in the phenomenon of translation — you'll be using knowledge outside the dictionary definitions of words to determine how to phrase expressions. You may even study the phenomenon to increase your awareness of what translation involves and to improve your skills.

Translation can also be broken down into various types to shed light on different approaches to it. Part of your job as a translator will involve educating people about what you do. The more information and clarity you have about what translators do and how they do it, the better you can explain what you do to future clients and others.

Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), a Russian-born linguist and literary theorist who eventually became a professor at Harvard University, identified three types of translation:

- » **Intralingual translation:** Commonly referred to as *rewording*, *intralingual translation* involves rephrasing an expression in the same language; for example, you translate "I'm famished" to "I'm starving." Yes, technically speaking, anyone who's ever cracked open a thesaurus to find a more precise word or different way to express a thought has done translation. Anyone who's ever said "in other words" before rephrasing what was previously said, has also done translation.
- » **Interlingual translation:** *Interlingual translation* involves converting text written in one language into another language; for example, in English, you think, "I'm hungry," and then you write a note telling your Spanish friend, "Tengo hambre." This is also referred to as "translation proper" and usually what most people are thinking about when they hear the word "translation."

» **Intersemiotic translation:** *Intersemiotic translation* involves converting a verbal expression into a nonverbal expression, and vice versa; for example, it might be turning a poem into music or a performance, or drawing the definition of a word.



REMEMBER

This discussion may strike you as a touch too theoretical, but it can help you explain what you do to other people who don't have a background or training in translation. Monolinguals who are asked to reword something can get a sense of the decision-making process you go through as an English-to-Portuguese translator, for example, by engaging in intralingual translation. Keep these terms in your back pocket to help people better understand how translation works and the decision-making process that guides the work of translators.

Expanding the definition

A simple definition of *translation* is reading a text in one language and then rendering it in another language. As you become a translator, you'll become more and more aware of how limited that definition can be and how it affects the way you talk about your work. You won't want to bore someone with all the details of what translators do, although they're fascinating, so that basic definition is a good starting point. But keep in mind that the limited definition can lead to misunderstandings regarding what you do and what people expect of you. Working with an expanded, more nuanced definition of translation can help prevent misunderstandings and manage client and professional partner expectations. Here are some takes on translation that can help you expand your definition of it:

- » **Translation is a critical part of communications in a multilingual world and especially in multilingual communities.** Translation must be considered at the onset of planning for any communication within a multilingual community. Treating translation as an afterthought compromises the translation's quality and delivery time.
- » **Translation extends beyond words.** Translators need technical skills to work with tools that efficiently and effectively help create quality translations. This ranges from knowing how to manage files to using translation memory tools to ensure consistency among the use of terms.
- » **Translation is education.** The recipients of a translation receive a text with information and ideas that they otherwise wouldn't have access to had the translation not been done. For example, the translation process and products can increase familiarity of the languages and cultures in a given community so that community leaders have deeper insight into the unique needs of the different populations that make up the community. Translations also educate the individuals who do the work.

- » **Translation requires advocacy.** Because those not in the field may not fully understand what translation entails, translators often find themselves advocating for appropriate timelines, planning, and resources, including compensation. Translators might also find themselves advocating for equality among different language groups in a given community.
- » **Translations are originals.** Translations are often thought of as inferior to the original because the author of the original had to be clever enough to come up with the idea and have the creativity and skill to express it in words. People often assume that the original required far more work, creativity, and skill than the translation. However, every translation is an original. It has never existed before, and it has taken considerable knowledge, creativity, and skill to produce. The effort and expertise that a translator brings to a project is different from but not inferior to those of the author. Some translations, often including ones which have been highly localized, are even preferable to the original for multilingual audiences. For example, many people who are bilingual in Latin American Spanish and English consider the movie *Shrek* (2001), directed by Andrew Anderson and Vicky Jenson, to be more enjoyable in Spanish because of the quality of the translation.

As you grow as a translator, think of what you might add to the list that further defines translation and reflects translation's value.

Seeing Translation All Around You

Translation is ubiquitous. All you have to do is pick up the phone, flip through a magazine, surf the web, turn on the TV, or browse the community bulletin board at your local grocery store to see translation in action. As the world becomes more global and our communities become more multicultural and multilingual, translation becomes an even greater necessity. After all, whenever people who speak different languages need to communicate or rely on the same resources in their everyday lives, there is a need for translation. This exchange enriches all our lives.

As demand for translation grows, so do the opportunities for trained translators who are able to efficiently and effectively be part of the translation process. Since this need grows along with the development of other translation tools, translators will continue to translate, revise, work in human and machine-translation hybrid situations, and perhaps be called upon for more consultation work.

In this section I highlight several areas where you can observe translation in action.

On the smartphone

You don't have to go very far to encounter translation. Sometimes all you need to do is pick up the phone. From automated customer service contact centers to AI-driven text messaging apps, you can't avoid bumping into translation services. Here are a few examples:

- » **Automated customer support centers:** Whenever you call a customer support line, one of the first prompts you get is to press the number key for the language you want to use. Maybe you press 1 for English or 2 for Spanish. Maybe you're given other options. You're then presented options in the language you chose. All these systems rely on input from translators.
- » **Operating system (OS):** Whether you have an iPhone or an Android, you can specify the language you want to use. Apple's iOS can be localized to more than 100 languages and regions, and the iOS itself has been translated into more than 40 languages.
- » **Smartphone apps:** Many smartphone apps these days are available in multiple languages. You access settings for the app and specify your preferred language. From that point on, the entire interface is presented in your preferred language.
- » **Text messaging:** With most text messaging apps, you can specify your preferred language, and the app will function in that language. For example, as you type, the autocomplete feature will try to predict the word you're typing in the specified language. Some text messaging apps may try to detect the language that they sense you're typing (or speaking, if you're using talk-to-text).

As you may have noticed, technology has a lot of catching up to do when it comes to living a multilingual life. For example, if you communicate with someone in multiple languages, texting can be a nightmare. How frustrating is it when you try to type a text message in a language other than English and your phone resists and keeps pushing what you type into English! Even worse is when your phone tries to help you by detecting the language it thinks you're using and guesses wrong, creating a mashup of languages best described as gibberish.



TIP

Changing the language setting on your phone on a regular basis is one way to practice using all your languages. For instance, if you've always had your phone in English, try switching it to Spanish.

On the internet

On the internet, some sites are available in multiple languages, and some aren't. Among the sites that are accessible in multiple languages, the quality of the translation can vary considerably. In fact, people who manage sites take different approaches to providing multilingual access. Some of these approaches are done by professionals and others are not. Here are some of the most common approaches:

- » **Professional translation:** Some website administrators hire professional translators to adapt their site to accommodate differences in languages and countries, including differences in currencies. In fact, large global operations may have entirely separate websites for different countries, with a distinct address for each site. For example, in the United States, shoppers go to Amazon.com, but in Spain, they shop at Amazon.es. In addition, in the navigation bar at the top of the page, shoppers can choose to navigate the site in Spain in Spanish or in Portuguese.
- » **Partial translation:** Some sites provide multilingual access to only relevant areas or content. In some cases, the website administrator hires a professional to summarize the website's content and then translate that summary into other languages. For examples, help parts of a website are usually a big one for translation.
- » **Crowdsourced translation:** Some sites crowdsource their translation. This means that they have volunteers translate their content. The quality of the translations can be questionable.
- » **Automated translation:** Some sites employ the use of Google Translate, or another machine translation tool, to automatically translate the site's content and menu options. Visitors to the site can click an icon to translate the site into the language of their choice. If you're on a site that uses Google Translate, you're reading a machine translation. You can usually tell because some of the wording can be awkward and unnatural, and depending on the language, not make any sense at all.

If you access social media content in multiple languages, you may have noticed that Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms seem to determine your preferred language for you. You pull up a post written by a contact of yours in German, and the platform automatically translates it into English because that's the language you typically use. So even though you're capable of communicating in multiple languages, the app pushes your multilingual life into a monolingual one. These translations aren't done in the moment by human translators; rather, they're done by machine translation. After using the app, you may be prompted to provide feedback to make the machine translations better.



TIP

The next time you're on a social media app and read a post with language that sounds a bit off, check to see if it's a translation. You'll know if it's a translation if you see "See original" usually located somewhere in the post. You might think that a user has a poor use of language when really it's just a poor translation that you're reading.

On television and in films

Thanks to the growing popularity of video streaming around the world, people have access to movies and series produced in distant countries — everywhere from Mexico to Norway to China and beyond. In many cases, you can still enjoy this video content even if you don't know the language thanks to translators who create the subtitles or translate the screenplay so the shows can be dubbed. Sometimes the dubbing is so well done that you can barely tell that the actors are speaking in a different language from the one you're hearing.



TIP

When you're watching a film, enable both subtitles and dubbing and look for differences between the two. What an actor says and what appears in the subtitle are often different. When done with high standards, the dubbing needs to make adjustments so the words line up better with the movement of the actors' lips. Subtitles also have parameters such as word economy. The industry standard is a maximum of 35–40 characters per line, two lines maximum, between one and six seconds per subtitle. Some of the first things to go when cutting down subtitles to make them fit will be a character's name, for example. Often the people that translate for dubbing aren't the same people that do subtitles.

Here are some important points about dubbing and subtitling that may come in handy as you pursue a career in translation:

» **Pros and cons of dubbing:** The primary benefit of dubbing is to increase engagement. It makes movies and series more accessible to a broader audience, which means they're more profitable for the studios and creators. For some viewers, it also makes movies more enjoyable if they don't like having to read subtitles. Despite these benefits, dubbing isn't always the solution. It's expensive because the entire soundtrack needs to be replaced, which requires a recording studio and a whole new cast of actors to deliver the lines. Critics of dubbing also claim that dubbed films lack authenticity due to subtle changes in meaning, tone, and cultural nuances. Language pride and politics also come into play — in some regions, audiences don't want to or are discouraged from hearing anything other than their own language. Dubbing also allows for censoring, which was done by fascist regimes in Germany, Italy,

and Spain. Fortunately, times have changed. Italy now hosts the annual Gran Premio Internazionale del Doppiaggio, which is a ceremony for excellence in dubbing.

» **Challenges of subtitles:** Some languages with smaller markets choose to subtitle their content. This has been the case in the Scandinavian countries where English proficiency is high. Subtitling is usually a cheaper and faster option than dubbing, but it's no less challenging. It's not merely a translated transcription of what's being said. Subtitles need to be concise, accurate, and readable. They need to comply with strict time and space requirements. They need to fit within a limited area on the screen so that they don't distract from the action, and they need to be succinct enough to be read in the limited amount of time the actors are delivering their lines. Translators also need to produce a time code to indicate at what point in the action each line appears and how long it needs to remain onscreen. Subtitling requires technical and linguistic knowledge along with specialized software.



REMEMBER

A *transcription* is a written, word-for-word record of what someone said orally in the same language. A *translated transcription* is a translation of that transcription. A film's translated transcription isn't the same as its subtitles.



WARNING

Don't confuse closed captioning with subtitles. Closed captioning is in the same language as the original video production or a translation of the original video production. Subtitles are translated from the original language into a different language. Closed captioning, even if it is a translation of what is being said, is not to be confused with subtitling.

The instructions you read

Many products — everything from games and home appliances to automobiles and yard equipment — come with manuals or instruction sheets. Often, they're provided in multiple languages. Sometimes you turn to the English and it sounds great. That's probably because the instructions were first done in English or, if they weren't, the translator did an excellent job. When the instructions are poorly written in English, it could be because the company didn't use a skilled translator. They might have used a person who spoke some English, but not a qualified translator. If you're faced with instructions that have you scratching your head, try reading one of the other languages as a viable workaround.

Some companies are foregoing the process of trying to provide instructions in multiple languages for different audiences. Instead, they're opting to communicate entirely with images. If you've ever put together a piece of furniture from IKEA, you probably followed the instructions, which are a series of drawings. IKEA has more than 450 stores in over 60 markets around the world. Their website is available in many languages, including Basque, Catalan, and Galician. However, providing instructions in all those languages wouldn't be very cost efficient, so IKEA cleverly decided to use what can be considered a universal language: illustrations. Instead of *telling* customers how to assemble their furniture, they *show* them how. Customers don't even need to be able to read in any language; they can just follow the pictures. Yes, sometimes the pictures can be difficult to decipher, but they typically provide all the instruction you need to get the job done, and they're fun to look at.

Translated books

Some of the books you have at home might be translations. You can certainly find some at your local library and bookstore. Without translated books, thanks to the work of translators, there would only be books written by authors in the languages you know. If that language is English, you'd only have access to books by authors who write in English. That may not be a huge issue unless the leading author on a topic that interests you writes only in French or Swahili. In certain countries, having access to only those books written in the local language can pose an even bigger problem. As Mette Holm, Danish translator of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, points out, if all you had to read were books written in Danish that weren't translations into Danish, within your lifetime, you would run out of books to read. Is this accurate? It depends on how fast you read and what kind of books you want to read. But what it does tell us is that our reading list and our world would be impossibly limited.

The market for translated books certainly has room to grow, especially in the United States. Currently, it struggles for several reasons, including the following:

» **Publishers in some countries market a relatively low percentage of translated books.** In countries like France, close to 20 percent of all books on the market are translations. In Spain, the number is closer to 30 percent. In the English-speaking world, it's about 3 percent. This imbalance can be attributed to a number of factors. When translation doesn't happen it's a missed opportunity for authors who write in languages other than English to expand their reach and for people who read books in English to expand their minds.

- » **Many publishers in the English-speaking world have the perception that monolingual people who read books in English aren't interested in reading a translated book.** This perception has been in circulation for some time, but the situation is like the chicken and the egg scenario; if publishers think that demand for translated books is low, they won't publish them, but if readers don't have access to translated books, they don't have any idea what they're missing. Book publishers can learn a great deal from video streaming services. When viewers have access to entertaining foreign films and series with quality subtitles and dubbing, they stream that content and often discover that some of the most innovative and entertaining content is coming out of lesser-known regions and cultures.
- » **Translators aren't named.** Because the translator's name is omitted from the cover, people often read translated books without ever realizing that they're reading a translation. By omitting the translator's name, publishers are failing to advertise and promote translated books, and recognize the efforts, art, and skill of translators. As a result, they're missing an opportunity to grow the market for these titles.
- » **Finding translated books in bookstores is a challenge.** Most bookstores in the United States don't have a translated book section or any way to draw more attention to translated books. As a result, little is done to attract shoppers to translations.

Pay more attention to the books in your hands. Are any of them translations? If not, make a concerted effort to read a translated book. Find an author who writes in a language you don't understand and see if a translation of one of their books is available. In doing so, you'll be supporting fellow translators! If you know someone who lives abroad, ask them about popular authors who live in that region and see if you can find a translation of one of their books.

Figure 1-1 illustrates the many ways reading translations benefits everyone.

Encouraging news! The Booker Prize Foundation shows that younger readers are interested in translated fiction. In the United Kingdom, for example, book buyers under the age of 35 account for almost half of the purchases of translated fiction.

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<h1>Library Book Card</h1>		
<h2>Check Out Translation!</h2>		
<h3>Benefits of Reading Translated Books</h3>		
DATE	ISSUED TO	
01	<i>Travel without boarding a plane.</i>	
02	Learn about different cultures for free through your local library.	
03	Connect with authors who don't speak your language.	
04	<i>Discover books that readers who know other languages are reading.</i>	
05	Meet characters who experience similar things as you in different ways.	
06	<i>Expand your view of the world.</i>	
07	Read two art works in one: the author's ideas and the translator's creatively selected words.	
08	<i>Help writers become known outside their languages.</i>	
09	MAKE PUBLISHERS UNDERSTAND THAT READERS WANT DIVERSE BOOKS.	
10	Support the people who make all of this possible: Translators!	
<small>Designed by Adelyn Hoyt. Concept by Regina Galasso. Content created by Adelyn Hoyt, Carolina Valentin, Grace Juma, Isabel Ford, Laurine Da Costa Viana, Olivia Diniz, Samuel Saiz de Marín, Stille Bahaleba, and Tomás Estrada Hevia as part of the UMass Amherst course Spanish 314: Practicing Literary Translation (Spring 2024).</small>		

FIGURE 1-1:
How translation broadens horizons!

Busting Common Translation Misconceptions

People get funny notions in their heads about a lot of things in this world. We still have people walking around who are convinced that Earth is flat, that humans have never landed on the moon, that we use only 10 percent of our brains, and that if you shave hair it grows back thicker.

The world of translation has its own myths as well. In this section, I challenge some of the more common myths and share what you really need to know about translation.

Translation isn't fast, cheap, and easy

Thanks to Google Translate and other free machine translators, translation comes across as being fast, cheap, and easy, but it's none of those. Translation requires knowledge, creativity, and skills, which take tremendous time and effort to acquire. Translation takes time. You can't translate a 30-page document from English to Arabic in a couple hours; depending on the word count, complexity of the document, and many other factors, a translation of that magnitude could take more than a week. Machines and other tools can make the process more efficient, but human translators need to be involved to ensure the quality of the translation and that it was done in a responsible and ethical fashion.

You don't need to know several languages

When you start to tell people that you're a translator, some may ask you right away how many languages you know. To be an excellent translator you need to know a lot about language in general, but you only need to know two languages — the one you're translating *from* and the one you're translating *into*.



REMEMBER

Some people think that the language you need to know better is the one you're translating from because you need to fully understand what you're reading before you can translate it. However, you need to be stronger in the language you're translating *into*. Why? Here are several reasons:

- » When reading the source document, you need to understand everything about it. To achieve that understanding you can consult dictionaries, other texts and resources, and people. You have to do your research. When you're a translator, what usually counts most is the translation or the document you produce so your writing skills in the language of the translation need to be top notch. Reading and understanding are generally easier than writing.
- » To create a translation, you need to understand the cultural context, idioms, and expressions of the target language to write in a way in the translation that makes sense to the target audience and resonates with them.
- » Having a strong command of the target language enables you to create translations that will be effective to your readers.
- » In your stronger language, you have a more robust vocabulary to draw from. When reading something in another language, if you encounter an unfamiliar word, you can look it up.

- » You don't need to catch typos or errors in grammar or spelling in the document you're translating from, but you do need to catch and correct these errors in the translated document you're producing. Keep in mind that it's an effective practice to have another person, who is a qualified editor, review your translation for typos and grammatical errors. Many times you'll know your translation so well, that you won't be able to see the little things.

Being bilingual isn't enough

People often assume that just because someone's bilingual (they know two languages), they can translate. This belief isn't entirely accurate. In fact, in certain situations, translating can be stressful on bilinguals when they don't have the knowledge, training, and experience that go into translation skills. In addition to knowing the source and target languages, translators need skills that include the following:

- » Cultural awareness of both cultures
- » Research skills so that you can find an effective way to make the translation
- » Grammar and writing skills
- » A robust vocabulary — sometimes a highly specialized vocabulary, as is needed in medical, legal, or any other area of specialization
- » Computer skills
- » Attention to detail
- » Time management skills such as planning and scheduling
- » Knowledge of the profession
- » Interpersonal skills to work with colleagues or clients effectively

Translators aren't automatically interpreters

Translators work with written texts. Interpreters translate spoken language from one language to another. Translation and interpreting each requires its own skill set. Being a translator doesn't automatically qualify you to be an interpreter, or vice versa. However, knowing the differences between what translators do and what interpreters do is important because, as a professional, you may be mistaken for an interpreter. You'll have to educate your clients on the differences between the two.

In the previous section I presented the skill set of a translator. An interpreter requires a different skill set that includes the following:

- » Excellent language skills in both the source and the target languages
- » Cultural awareness of both cultures
- » Strong listening skills
- » Oral fluency, or the ability to speak clearly and confidently
- » Decision-making skills
- » Focused concentration
- » Ability to pick up on and understand nonverbal communication in the context of the two cultures
- » Good short-term memory

Translators aren't just walking dictionaries

When you tell people you're a translator they might ask you to translate a single word on the spot. This is not a fair ask of translators because they need to know the context to produce an accurate translation. For instance, if someone asks you to translate the Spanish word *ROSA* without giving you any contextual information, you could translate it as *rose* (the flower), *rose* (the color), *pink* (the color), or *Rose* (the woman's name). And if you found out *ROSA* was a woman's name, you'd probably recommend not translating it because proper nouns usually aren't translated. The range of possible meanings of a single word can be eye-opening to non-translators.

In short, translating words out of context is not what translators do. So testing their translations skills based on throwing random words at them is not fair game. Translators want to know where the words are appearing, why they're being used, and what other words surround them. As a translator, you'll need to educate people that translators translate context instead of words, although words is the material they work with.

Translators can't translate anything and everything

Just because you know a language doesn't mean you're equipped to translate anything and everything written in that language. For example, if you're a German-English translator who specializes in the cosmetic and skin-care

industry, you understand very well what’s written in German and know how to identify reliable sources if you need to research something. You know the specialized words in English so that you can translate the documents adequately for the English-speaking audience. However, being a translator in the cosmetics and skin-care industry doesn’t automatically make you the best choice for translating an Individualized Education Program document for the local school district’s Special Education Department. You’d need more of a background in education — more specifically, special education.

Translation transcends loss and impossibility

Have you heard the phrase *lost in translation*? It’s an overused phrase implying that whenever something is translated from one language to another, the meaning or clarity is diminished. It seems to be the go-to phrase for news and media headlines to tag events involving multiple languages. Loss does happen in translation. Translation changes everything. You can’t convey the full meaning, tone, and cultural nuances of an expression written in one language in another language. Yes, something gets lost, but often something is gained as well. For one, information, ideas, and a text that were not previously accessible to speakers of a given language are made accessible thanks to translation.

Some people say that translation is impossible. This is something we could talk about for hours, but what I want to point out is that these very words, “translation is impossible,” don’t help non-translators embrace the translation process, one that is needed so that people get information to the access they need and so that our minds can grow. To counter the idea of translation being impossible, I offer the following two insights:

- » Translation is possible because it’s been done successfully and continues to enable people to understand one another through texts written in different languages.
- » Language is an imprecise communication medium. Even two people speaking the same language, living in the same home, or working in the same office can have misunderstandings based on the words they use to express what they’re thinking. Until humans start communicating telepathically, language will serve as both a bridge and a barrier to communication.



REMEMBER

Maintain a positive attitude about translation. Don’t think so much in terms of the limitations but more in terms of possibilities and opportunities. Translation is the key to communication and understanding in a multilingual world.


Imagine a house built with MAGNA-TILES. Now, you're given Legos and told to replicate that MAGNA-TILE house (see Figure 1-2). That's what translating is like. Think of each Lego or tile as a word. In one language, you're working with Legos. In the other language, you're working with tiles. The houses can't possibly be identical, but they can be similar, serve the same basic function, and have some things in common. Thanks to Barcelona-based writer and translator Javier Calvo for introducing the building block metaphor into the world of translation.

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Check Out Translation!


Construction Site: Translating with Building Blocks

When we use language, each word is like a MAGNA-TILE. We put words together to build sentences just like we put tiles together to make a house. What's it like to take a message that was written in one language and move it to another? When we move words from one language to another, it's like we're using Legos to make a MAGNA-TILE house. How does that happen? Try it!



1. Take a look at this MAGNA-TILE house.

2. Now, try to recreate the MAGNA-TILE house with Legos. Be creative!



3. When you're done, look at your Lego house and answer these questions:
 - What features of the house did you try to keep?
 - What features are different? How are they different?
 - Why did you have to make things different?
 - What do these differences tell us about MAGNA-TILES? What do they tell us about Legos?
 - If there are other Lego houses made by other library visitors, how does your Lego house look and not look like theirs?
 - Is there a right way to build a MAGNA-TILE house out of Legos?

By building the MAGNA-TILE house with Legos, you experienced something similar to the way translators work when they read a book written in one language and then write it in another language. Congratulations!

Designed by Anelys Rey. Content created by Grace Juna for as part of the UMass Amherst course Spanish 314: Practicing Literary Translation (Spring 2024). Adapted from an activity sheet originally created for The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art's book exhibition *Read The World: Picture Books and Translation*, as a part of the Amherst College course Spanish 451: Translation Roots of a US Literary Landscape (Fall 2021) taught by Professor Regina Galasso (UMass Amherst).

SPANISH & PORTUGUESE
Catalan Studies

University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

UMass Amherst
Translation Center

Forbes
Library

FIGURE 1-2:
The building
block translation
metaphor.

INDIRECT TALK ABOUT TRANSLATION: TRANSLATION METAPHORS AND MORE

Understanding what translation is and what it involves can be difficult until you've studied it and done translations. To describe it in ways that the untrained mind can understand, people have created some descriptive metaphors over the years. Here are a few that may help you conceptualize translation more clearly in your mind:

- **Traduttore, traditore:** You may have heard people say that translators are traitors. This comes from the Italian saying *traduttore, traditore*, or *translator, traitor* in English. The idea is that translation is a betrayal. As change happens in translation, no translation can fully do all that its source text does. The translator uses knowledge and creativity to make the translation work for the target language and audience. Although I can certainly understand the concept of translation as betrayal, I prefer to think of it more as a valuable service, product, and creative and intellectual activity — it makes something accessible to people who would otherwise lack access to it. It's a betrayal if it's done poorly or used intentionally to mislead or misinform.
- **The reverse side of a tapestry:** Have you ever held a tapestry? Have you ever flipped it over to see what the reverse side of it looks like? In the second part of the literary classic *Don Quijote de la Mancha* is a metaphor about translation being like the reverse side of a tapestry. The side intended to be viewed shows the image of what the creator wanted people to see. The reverse side provides a different perspective that is part of the same work.
- **Kissing someone through a lace veil:** The Israeli poet Chaim Nachman Bialik talked about translation as being like kissing a bride through her veil.
- **Dancing on ropes:** In her book *Dancing on Ropes: Translators and the Balance of History* (2021), Anna Aslanyan shares a collection of anecdotes from the world of translation. She presents translators and interpreters as the go-betweens and highlights their key roles in history.
- **An interpretative performance:** When an artist performs in front of an audience or camera or in a recording studio, they're usually following something in writing — a musical score, dialogue and direction in a play or movie script, the lyrics of a song. As they perform, they infuse that written direction with their own interpretation of it, their own background, their unique personality, their training. No two artists deliver an identical performance of the same work. In the same way, two translators could work on the same text and produce different translations. Neither is better than the other, just different.
- **The bridge:** This go-to metaphor for describing translation compares it to a bridge that connects two languages, two cultures, two people.

- **The purest form of writing:** Jason Grunebaum, a writer and Hindi translator, presents translation as the purest form of writing. He says that “no other mode of writing is as exclusively focused on language as translation.”

Although these metaphors and indirect talk about translation are helpful to convey a general idea of what translation is and what it's like, more concrete descriptions are necessary for its practical application and for educating people. Only through education can people begin to understand, appreciate, and respect what the translation process entails and the important purpose it serves.

Deciphering Key Translation Terminology

As a translator or future translator, you appreciate the meanings of words. Communicating in any language requires that everyone in the loop have a shared understanding of what the words they're using mean. When you're becoming a translator, you need to know the meanings of a few key terms, such as *source* and *target*, *equivalence*, *localization*, and *translation industry*. In this section I define these terms.

Source

The text you translate is called the *source text*. The language of that text is called the *source language*. If you're translating documents for a school district, you may receive a request to translate a parent handbook from English to Spanish. In this case, the English version of the parent handbook would be the source text, and the source language would be English.

In your process of becoming a translator, you're soon going to realize that translators don't only think critically about the words they translate and the words they select for their translations; they think critically about all words, everywhere! *Source* can be uneasy for translators because it often gives the impression to non-translators that the translators find all they need to know to create their translation in the source text. The source text doesn't contain everything necessary for the translator to produce a quality translation. Many times, translators need to consult texts and other resources beyond the source text to produce an accurate translation. So the use of *source* may diminish the extent of the work that translators need to do.

Target

The *target language* is the language you're translating into. If you receive a parent handbook from a school district to translate from English into Spanish, the target language is Spanish and your translation will be the target text. Who is your target audience? The Spanish-speaking parents of the school district who will read your translation. You're translating with them in mind as the readers who need to understand the manual.

As you can imagine, although *target* may work as jargon and to communicate with clients and fellow translators, it doesn't sit well with all translators. *Target* implies a selected spot that's the aim of attack or the one well-defined objective. Having a single objective, a bull's-eye, implies that only one translation can hit the mark. In translation, two translators aren't likely to translate a text the same way, and neither translation is the absolute right one; they may be equally good. *Target* doesn't convey the variety that can be produced in translation.

Translators can decide how to translate a word based on its denotation and connotation. A word's *denotation* is its literal meaning. You can think of it as its dictionary definition. A word's *connotation* refers to the feelings and attitudes that the word suggests. The late Gregory Rabassa (1922–2016) translated Latin American literature into English. He translated Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez was known to say that Rabassa's English translation was better than his Spanish original. Rabassa tried to avoid the jargon of *target* because he was an infantryman, and a target was something you'd aim at with the intention to kill it.

Regardless of the negative connotations that the words *source* and *target* convey, you'll probably encounter them and use them in your training and work experience. Just keep in mind the limitations that these words place on what translation actually is and be prepared to expand your description when necessary and when people are open-minded enough to expand their understanding.

Equivalence

Equivalence, throughout history, has been a word that has been related to the definition of translation. Many definitions of translations express a desire for the target text to be equivalent to the source text. Equivalence as related to translation is hard to define. As a beginning translator, think of it as a concept that is built on the idea that the target text should accurately convey the meaning, style, and intent of a source text. Because languages and their contexts are different, there is no such thing as perfect equivalence. You might hear about different types of equivalence. To achieve whatever type of equivalence it is, a translator aims to make the target text match the source text as closely as possible in form, function,

and the impact it has on the reader, despite it being in an entirely different language. Keep in mind, though, that translation isn't a matching game. It is more of a decision-making process.

User manuals and policy documents tend to stay very close to the source text because those source texts are also written in a formulaic way. Texts that are more creative, such as novels, poems, and plays, tend to seek a balance between the meaning of the source text and how to get that meaning across to the target audience by taking some deeper deviations. For example, if you're translating an advertisement, your goal may be to convey the same meaning while triggering a similar emotional response in the viewer. Accomplishing that feat may require bigger changes than you might expect as a beginning translator to a degree that enables you to employ different stylistic techniques to evoke the desired emotion. When this happens, you might hear the term "transcreation."

Most translations go for the communicative approach.

You can view translation as being on a spectrum ranging from literal translation to open and free. At the literal end, you might encounter translations that are done for very specialized readers that are for whatever reason looking for a word-for-word translations. At the free end you encounter translations of more creative works. Most translations fall somewhere in the middle in the *communicative* range.

Keep in mind that a translated document doesn't need to be entirely literal or entirely free. Most translated documents contain a bit of all the types.

Localization

Localization is the process of adapting content, products, or services from one language or culture to another in a way that makes them more appropriate for a specific population. In the context of translations, it's mostly applicable to adapting a translation to a population that speaks a *dialect* (a variation of a standard language), such as Spanish for a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican audience, French for a French-speaking Haitian audience, or English for an English-speaking audience in Britain. Localization usually includes more than translating a text. It can include considerations of visual content and layout. Translation is just one step in a process to prepare print materials for a given audience. Localization usually involves a team of experts that include translators, consultants, and project managers.



TIP

To look up the differences in the regional usage of specific words, terms, and expressions, check out Diatopix at olst.ling.umontreal.ca/diatopix. For example, you can enter **tennis shoes** and **sneakers** and see where these words are used. The tool works for English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Here are a couple other sites where you can gain insight into localization:

- » The MacMillan Dictionary quiz on British and American English at www.onestopenglish.com/kahoot-quizzes/macmillan-dictionary-quizzes-british-or-american-english/1000756.article.
- » *Babbel Magazine's* Argentina Spanish quiz at www.babbel.com/en/magazine/quiz-argentine-spanish.

Translation industry

The *translation industry*, also known as the language industry or the language services industry, refers to the sector of the economy that makes products and provides services for facilitating and enhancing multilingual communication. These services include translation, interpretation, subtitling, dubbing, localization, terminology, editing, technical writing, testing, teaching, and more. It is one of the fastest growing and wealthiest industries in the world. In 2022, its value was estimated to be nearly \$67.2 billion.



TIP

On your way to becoming a translator, keep your eye on the translation industry. Check out slator.com, a source of analysis and research for the global translation, localization, and language technology industry. Slator.com hosts SlatorCon, an executive conference; publishes *SlatorPod*, the weekly language industry podcast; and owns LocJobs.com, the language industry talent hub.