



## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION?

People often confuse translation with interpretation. While both services involve adapting from one language to another, there are a number of important differences.

### Five Key Differences

1. **Spoken versus written**  
Interpretation is the transference of meaning between spoken languages, while translation is the transference of meaning between written languages.
2. **Real time versus delayed**  
Interpreting occurs in real time. It happens in person, on the phone, or through a television/video service. Because translation involves the written word, it typically takes place long after a text is created, which gives the translator time to access resources (dictionaries, glossaries, subject matter experts, etc.) to produce an accurate and effective end document (or website, help file, etc.).
3. **Level of accuracy**  
Interpretation and translation demand different levels of accuracy. While interpreters aim to be completely accurate, it's difficult to achieve in a live conversation. They may omit some details of the original speech as they interpret into the target language. Conversely, translators have time to evaluate and revise each word and sentence before delivering their product, so they can achieve a greater level of accuracy and greater fidelity to the original.
4. **Direction and fluency**  
An interpreter must be fluent enough in both the original language and the target language to be able to translate in both directions, on the spot, without any reference material. Interpreters are highly qualified people, and the work is quite demanding! It's so demanding that interpreters work in pairs and must switch off every 20 minutes or so to prevent mental fatigue.

Typically, professional translators only work in one direction—translating into their native language. As such, translators do not have to be *as* fluent in the source language as an interpreter must be. The key skills of a translator are to understand the source language and to use their knowledge of the target country's cultural and language norms to create an effective translated product.

5. **Intangibles**  
Both translators and interpreters are faced with the challenge of making metaphors, analogies, and idioms understandable to the audience in the target language. However, interpreters must also capture tone, inflection, voice quality, and the other intangible elements of the spoken word and convey those meaningfully to the audience.

Despite the differences in the skills of translators and interpreters, both are bilingual professionals who share a passion for conveying meaning to people who would otherwise be unable to understand the information at hand.

### How Interpretation Works

It's not uncommon for people to think that interpretation is a word-for-word translation of spoken words. However, if this were the case, the end result would be an unintelligible mess of words to the target audience. Interpreters must rephrase as needed to properly convey the concepts a speaker presents to the listening audience.

Even if you only speak English, you can better understand how challenging interpretation is by trying this:

Paraphrase someone's speech, with a half-sentence delay, while making sure you also understand and can paraphrase the next sentence. It's not as easy as it might seem!

## Five Types of Interpretation

1. **Simultaneous:** The interpreter sits in a booth, listens to the spoken content through headphones, and speaks the translated words into a microphone. As soon as the interpreter understands the general meaning of the sentence, he or she begins the interpretation.
2. **Consecutive:** The speaker stops frequently, typically every one to five minutes, to allow the interpreter to render what was said into the target language. The speaker's pauses come at the end of a paragraph or topic. While waiting, the interpreter sits or stands beside the speaker, listening and taking notes as the speaker progresses through the message.
3. **Whispered:** The interpreter sits or stands next to a small target-language audience and whispers a simultaneous interpretation. This method is generally used only when a few audience members do not speak the source language.
4. **Relay:** A source-language interpreter expresses the message to a group of interpreters who have a language in common and each speaks another language as well. In turn, these interpreters convey the message to their respective target audiences. For example, a German speech is first interpreted in English to a group of interpreters, and is then interpreted by each into French, Japanese, Spanish, and Italian.
5. **Liaison:** An interpreter translates into and out of the source and target languages as a conversation takes place. This is typically used for small, informal situations such as meetings.

## Qualities of an Effective Interpreter

- Familiar with the general subject of the spoken language that is to be interpreted.
- Intimately familiar with the cultures of both the original language and the target language.
- Extensive vocabulary in the original language and the target language.
- Expresses thoughts clearly and accurately in the target language.

- Excellent note-taking skills (when consecutive interpreting).
- Quick decision making skills (generally there is no time to assess which variant is best).

## How Translation Works

Most translators use a computer plus translation tools and technology to complete their work. First, they transform the piece to be translated to a file type that is easy to work with—usually RTF. Then, they apply a translation memory to that source text, which grabs past translations that match the current job and plugs them in automatically. Translators review those translations and translate the rest from scratch. They read each section of English, refer to a glossary and/or style guide, and then translate the source to the target language.

Next, a linguist other than the person who performed the original translations edits and proofreads them.

Lastly, the translations are ported into their original format, and desktop publishing or engineering may be needed so that the language version closely approximates the look of the English source version.

## Examples

**Interpretation:** In a courtroom, a refugee from Nepal is facing his landlord in a dispute to get his deposit back. He needs a Nepalese interpreter because his English is not strong enough for a courtroom setting.

**Translation:** A computer peripherals company needs to translate their Getting Started Guide into Spanish, so that Spanish speaking users can know how to install the device.

## What you Should Know

1. Translators and interpreters are not interchangeable.
2. The skills and tasks required are different for the two jobs.
3. Interpretation is used at live, in-person events, such as in courtrooms, police stations, hospitals, and government forums.
4. Translation typically only involves a translator and a computer.

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## About Lionbridge

Lionbridge (Nasdaq: LIOX) is the leading provider of translation, localization, and testing services. Organizations in all industries rely on Lionbridge language and testing services to increase international market share, speed adoption of products and content, and ensure the integrity of their global brands. Based in Waltham, Mass., Lionbridge operates across 26 countries, and provides services under the Lionbridge and VeriTest® brands.

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