

We are all “translators”

This is an edited extract from a talk I gave to a group of translators and interpreters from AUSIT (the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators) in 2004.

One would expect a professional translator to be very good at explaining and defending the words they use. In order to do this they would have to understand the meanings of those words and, for their defence to be effective, this understanding would have to be founded on some evidence. This evidence would at least include a survey of actual usage, a function historically though not exclusively performed by the authors of dictionaries.

One would further expect that the sensitivity of the professional translator for this type of understanding would be most acute in relation to those words most closely associated with their own field of expertise and livelihood.

Further one would expect that the demand for accurate, verifiable definitions of these particular words would be highest when professional translators organise and invest in the materials and activities that would represent their profession to the wider world.

Each of these expectations waits on a lonely street corner, unmet.

It is common for professional translators and interpreters, to claim that “Translation means the transfer of written messages from one language to another, while interpreting refers to the transfer of spoken messages.”

Unfortunately there is very little evidence to support this claim. For example none of the following dictionaries support the definition of “interpreting” being the conversion of speech from one language to another, nor of “translation” as being the same activity applied exclusively to written language.

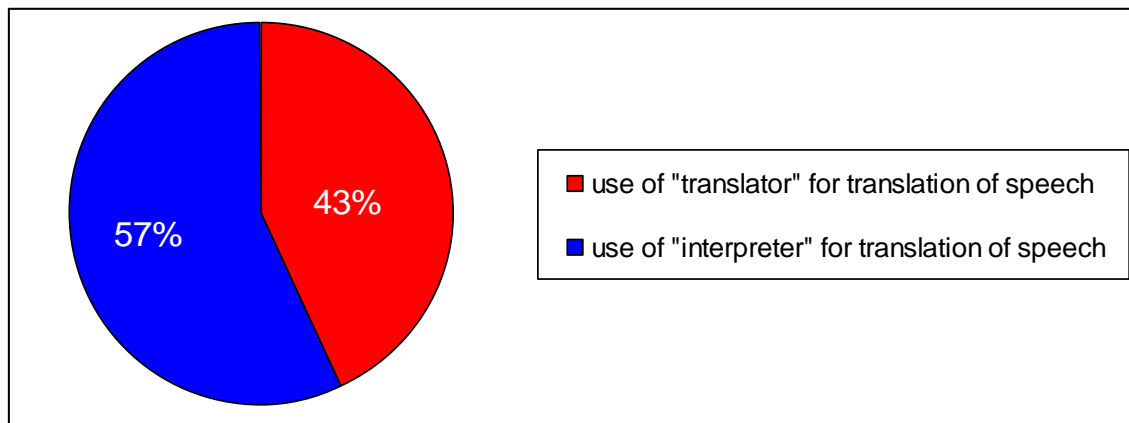
- The Longer Oxford English Dictionary
- Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged 1959
- The Macquarie Dictionary 1982
- A Glossary of Literary Terms ed. Abrams M. H. 1981
- Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics ed. Matthews, P. H. 1997
- Translation Terminology ed. Delisle, J., 1999
- Shuttleworth, M., Cowie, M, Dictionary of Translation Studies 1997

Of course the information available in dictionaries has been strained through the sieve of publishing economics; a business cycle much slower than words can be introduced and established within a language.

But we have nowadays an amazing tool for tracking the actual usage of words, and that tool is the internet and the various search engines we use, the foremost amongst them being Google. So here is an analysis of current usage, carried out through Google News, so we are looking at published or reported instances of usage, by journalists – educated, professional speakers and writers:

| Search term | Googits | 110103 |
|---------------------------|---------|-----------|
| "through a translator" | 388 | 2,450,000 |
| "through an interpreter" | 1149 | 3,630,000 |
| "help of an interpreter" | 16 | 548,000 |
| "help of a translator" | 17 | 85,000 |
| "his interpreter said" | 0 | 14,200 |
| "his translator said" | 5 | 14,900 |
| "using an interpreter" | 12 | 314,000 |
| "using a translator" | 1 | 444,000 |
| "through his interpreter" | 52 | 308,000 |
| "through his translator" | 22 | 236,000 |
| "acting as translator" | 4 | 49,100 |
| "acting as interpreter" | 5 | 117,000 |

And here's the breakdown.



As you can see, there is a 14% majority of the use of "interpreter" to refer to someone translating speech, but I'm not saying that either one of these is the correct word for that. What I am saying is that there is *not one skerrick of evidence* to support the convention of reserving the word "translator" for text *only*. Not one skerrick. [I ran this survey again October 2008 with even more interesting results. See end notes¹]

But still we all talk as though there is! Why? I have heard people say "translators and interpreters are completely different animals". This is complete bullshit.

I make a point, every time there is a gathering of practitioners, of getting a show of hands of people who translate text but have not done more than \$1,000 worth of interpreting in their lives, and vice versa. The total of those two groups of people is rarely more than 10%. The reality is that there are NOT two discrete groups of people, one of which is all "interpreters" and the other of which is all "translators".

We are all translators, and the majority of us work in both modes.

So neither dictionaries, nor actual modern usage, nor the reality, is remotely like this idea that "interpreters" and "translators" are completely different animals, or indeed that they have characteristically different standards, or interests, or motives, or personalities, or incomes or anything. We are basically, statistically, and really, the same people!

Now there are a number of points I want to make here.

The first is that I find it painfully ironic that an industry which purports to be expert in word usage can be so bloody ignorant, in every dimension, about the actual lexical geography that applies to their very own industry!

What is lexical geography?

Here is a diagram, see

| | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Hypernym</i> | <i>Potato</i> | | | |
| <i>Hyponyms</i> | <i>Desiree</i> | <i>Kipfler</i> | <i>Pontiac</i> | <i>Kennebec</i> |

The bottom ones, are *types* of the top one. OK?

Or like this

| | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| <i>Hypernym</i> | <i>Doctor</i> | | | |
| <i>Hyponyms</i> | <i>pediatrician</i> | <i>surgeon</i> | <i>GP</i> | <i>gastroenterologist</i> |

Now in our case this below is *actually* how these words are set out in the English language.

| | | |
|-----------------|--|---|
| <i>Hypernym</i> | <i>Translator</i> <i>(person who converts text and or speech from one language to another)</i> | |
| <i>Hyponyms</i> | <i>Interpreter</i> <i>(person who converts speech from one language to another, and this is very tenuous. The OED calls this usage "archaic")</i> | <i>????</i> <i>(Translator of text only)</i> |

Other than the conventional usage promoted forlornly by people working within our very small but well insulated industry, we don't actually have a word that strictly means "translator of text only" (or "speech only").

But this is what so many people, absence of evidence notwithstanding, *think* that the words mean in English:

| | | |
|-----------------|--|---|
| <i>Hypernym</i> | <i>????</i> <i>(person who converts from one language to another)</i> | |
| <i>Hyponyms</i> | <i>Interpreter</i> <i>(Translator of speech only)</i> | <i>Translator</i> <i>(Translator of text only)</i> |

Now the second point that I want to make here, is that I don't really care one way or the other. I suppose it would be useful to have distinct words for each of these boxes. And I do in fact use these words in the way that many practitioners think is the "right" way, but only insofar as it furthers my commercial aims. Sometimes I find that those aims are better served by sticking to the meaning that is right according to dictionaries, statistics and actual usage, sometimes not. If people ask I say that strictly speaking we are all translators but that some practitioners prefer this terminological convention. Whatever.

But the T&I industry in Australia, and in many other places overseas, doggedly push on trying to establish this scheme of usage, and acting outraged and astonished at the regular reminders that they encounter in the media, that *they alone* use the words in this way, and that vast majority of English speakers, and the media, and the people who publish dictionaries have yet to catch up.

(Please check more recent editions of these dictionaries. Maybe I'm out of date, but all the online dictionaries I checked all define "translate" as simply to convert from one language into another without mentioning anything about speech or text. They furthermore defined an interpreter as someone who "translates", but did not define translator as someone who "interprets".)

Have a look at this. (below) Let's say you were a "translator" asked to translate this document. It is a transcript of two people talking. But as you are translating a "text", then you are apparently a "translator"?!

A: Um..I was not gonna..I wasn't, you know..p..planning to drop it round...because, you know....you said
B: Yeah, I know what I said but how come Dean's here? and all that shit's here waiting for me to come over...everyone else is onto it, fine.. fine with it....you're saying you didn't know
A: Dean's got nothing to do with this he
B: He fuckin' has. He was there the day I asked and what I asked for was quite specific
A: It wasn't clear
B: Listen! Listen...right? I'm not fuckin' joking here. It was clear. It was perfectly bloody clear

And what about if you were an "interpreter", who was asked to "interpret", as someone spoke these words out loud:

It is this richness of our language, giving rise to the indeterminacy or inexplicitness sometimes referred as ambiguity, which is at the core of much legal practice. To some degree ambiguity in language performs the same role for the legal profession as physical illness performs for the medical profession. It is the source of much of our work, both as practitioners and as judges. Accordingly felicity and precision in expression should be regarded as the equivalent of preventative medicine.

One does not have to move too far from the dining table to relish our profession's preoccupation with words. In 1898 it fell to a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales to decide whether or not an oyster was a wild animal. Three men were caught with several bags of oysters in the then new National Park south of Sydney, contrary to notices which said that individuals could take oysters from the park, but only for their own consumption. The issue was whether or not they could be prosecuted for larceny of the oysters, being the property of the trustees of the National Park.

"This is an important matter", Mr Justice O'Connor sternly commenced his judgment. He decided that, like fish, oysters could not be property at common law before capture. They were *ferae naturae* and, accordingly, could not be the subject of larceny. His Honour set aside the conviction. [9]

Yes that's right, a person is talking and you are "interpreting" ..

Does this not strike you as ridiculous? The "text" is actually a transcript of a police phone tap. And this "speech", is actually a text that someone, (Spigelman – chief justice of NSW) has spent a long time composing, on paper, and which demonstrates a highly complex structure and numerous linguistic features almost never encountered in verbal discourse.

Clearly the approach, and resources, including time, the degree of difficulty etc. in translating the first text will be completely different to that of the second, which would be an extremely difficult experience for the "interpreter".

So what has happened here? Why do we cling to this absurd scheme of definitions, in the face of worldwide usage and common sense?

Because we are obsessed with describing ourselves, and are happy to completely ignore the actual problem, which is words!

Our whole industry thinks that it is enough to analyse people! And never bothers to analyse texts!

Why? Because the strict meaning of the words "interpreter" and "translator" are of secondary importance to us, and we are far more concerned with using them as noises to get people to understand who we are as people, and which group we belong to and why they should respect us.

Please bear all these comments in mind next time you are reading the ebulletin where



someone says “Oh AUSIT doesn’t do enough for translators...” or “It’s easy for translators because they make so much money..” or whatever crazy imaginary world pops up in the AUSIT deludron.

And in the process, we have actually missed the opportunity to name our own profession, and proclaim to the world exactly what it does! And instead we would rather bodgy up two imaginary tribes and snipe at one another and call each other different animals.

In other words we are completely inward looking. We have yet to stop and ask ourselves:

“What is the client trying to do? Why is the language barrier preventing this? How can I overcome this problem?”

and therefore most important of all:

“What’s going on with the actual nouns, verbs, adjectives, participles, conjunction, prepositions, syntax, grammar, logic, context and implicature? What is ‘accuracy’ in this context, what is ‘fidelity’? What sort of errors am I committing, what is their root cause and what further resources or help do I need to prevent or correct them? How can I minimise the impact of my work on the client’s process? How can I measure the quality of what I am doing? How can I explain that and communicate that and demonstrate that to my client?”

Those are the questions that a professional translator should concern themselves with from morning to night. And not one of them refers necessarily to text or to speech, do they? Do they? No. And you could spend your whole life just trying to answer those questions, developing better and better answers to those questions, and NOT ONCE do anything that is applicable to ONLY text or ONLY speech.

And in the evening, like the surgeon or the pediatrician, we can sit around and say that, due in part to personal preference, and market conditions, it just so happens that the bulk of our work is translating speech. Or translating text. Like the first bloke has thin fingers and poor social skills and the second likes kids. But it is only relatively trivial factors like personal preference and market conditions that determine this. Trivial compared to the existential importance of having a clearly named and well defined profession called – “Translation”. Like those two people are unambiguously both “doctors” and members of a professional called “medicine”.

We still lack this critical label.

I should mention though, that the T&I industry in the UK adheres to the same fiction, that they are “two completely different fields”, just as they do in Japan and the US. The reason these habits have taken root is because the markets there are incredibly big compared to Australia. But a person is the same size, and so empirically, many people can make a choice that then limits them to the one mode (and setting and even subject matter). I’ve met a person in Japan and all they do is translate manuals for electrical transformers! And he makes a living.

So I’ve been lucky to live in Australia where I’ve had to be prepared to do absolutely any damn thing to get by, and have so experienced the fact that all the important concerns actually apply across the board.

Whereas people who have only ever done one thing, well, they can see something through a keyhole, and they think they can see the whole world.

It is almost hopeless. Almost all translators think this, and while we are sitting here trying to

better ourselves, they are out there cementing into place these completely fictional and idiotic notions!

I had previously hoped to change things through my participation in the professional organisation AUSIT, but I have given up. But no fear there is good news! Yes. Individuals remain. You and you and you and I are all individuals, and it is only individuals who can achieve real change, and the change they achieve is the only change that matters.

I am now concentrating on the only two types of people that I care about. Those who give me money, and those to whom I give money. Really, it is their understanding of these things alone that I care about, and if I can get them to understand, then the benefits to me are enormous. The rest of the world can go to hell. In fact, I rather like the slow progress of all the retarded ideas that dominate AUSIT and the rest of the profession. Because it makes it so much easier for me to compete. It gives me even better market differentiation. You can join me too if you like, if only for lunch.

