

**Translating and Interpreting in the United States:  
Neglect and Opportunity**

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**This planet has become small and overcrowded. Even in the spacious United States there are regions that more resemble beehives than human habitats: Southern California, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta, even regions of this former rural area of Florida where in a few more years the people may outnumber the oranges. In New York, each Sunday, there are church services in over twenty languages. If a traveler from Mongolia walks into the main terminal of Miami International Airport for the first time, he cannot be certain whether Spanish or English is the native language there. In the age of mobility and the jet plane, in the age of multinational corporations and millions of refugees, several languages are routinely heard side by side where many people congregate.**

**In the last 150 years, while groups of several million people have settled in so many small areas, the planet has simultaneously been swept by a revolution in human communication, from the telegraph to the telephone, from the airmail letter on Pan Am to the e-mail message on the Internet. Today, torrents of words in a hundred languages are zipping around the globe every minute of each day. The Mongolian traveler in Miami can fax a message to Ulaanbataar instantly. We stand at the threshold of universal satellite television in many languages. The United States has become the leader in many fields, particularly in transporting people and their messages, not only between points on this earth but between the earth and the moon with human beings and between all of the planets and the earth with our mechanical space probes. The United States has commercial and diplomatic relations with virtually every nation in the world. We are members of the United Nations and other international organizations employing several official languages.**

**If this description is relatively accurate, then this should be the age of the foreign language teacher, translator and interpreter like never before. And if the United States is the leading nation, then more so here than anywhere else. There should be a need for hundreds of thousands of practitioners of these three professions – and there is. The American educational establishment should graduate many thousands of reliable foreign language teachers, translators and interpreters each year – but it does not. In the field of languages, it is too busy writing many thousands of research papers on language theories, most of them for the benefit of the individual who needs academic credits, but of doubtful value for the society as a whole, while it is doing very little to supply the nation with the applied language professionals whom it so desperately needs at this time in its history.**

**But before we look into the topic of neglect and the causes for it, let us take a look at the marketplace for the professions of translator and interpreter in the United States and at who the players in that market are.**

Less than half of the translating and interpreting done in the United States is done by professionally trained practitioners. The rest is done by persons who have knowledge of other languages and dictionaries but no or little aptitude for this line of work, let alone the professional training which only colleges and universities and a handful of other specialized institutions can provide. In Europe and in Canada, the amateurs in this field are far and few between. In the United States they predominate in several areas, because somebody has to fill the gap between demand and supply.

That demand, which is already great, is likely to rise dramatically in the next three decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, American businessmen finally began to learn how to export their goods and services, spurred on by the conquest of large chunks of our domestic market by foreign goods and services. In the 1960s we used to sell 95% of our goods and services right here in America. Foreign export successes have shrunk that market considerably. In some areas we lost almost all of it. Just think of radios, television sets and motorcycles. This loss must be counterbalanced by American exports to other countries. This balance is slow in developing, which has led to annual trade and payment deficits of intolerable proportions. A very significant percentage of our trade deficit would disappear if we had the same resources in the field of translation and interpretation that the countries of Western Europe possess.

A major reason for the success of foreigners in our market is their advanced knowledge of English and their skill in employing the tools of professional translating and interpreting in the conquest of new markets. When I visited the Siemens Company in Munich many years ago, they had a staff of about 200 translators putting their business correspondence, sales literature and operations manuals into Spanish, English and other languages. The knowledge of foreign languages and foreign business practices is the best key to foreign markets. Lower prices are not enough. It takes much more than that to get a foothold in other markets. American businessmen are finally beginning to understand this. With that new-found knowledge will come an increase in demand for translators and interpreters, and, by extension, for teachers of foreign languages.

There is a good reason why AT&T, in the past more of a traditional and somewhat ruthless monopoly rather than a progressive company, has made a considerable investment in interpreting and translating and keeps expanding its first foothold in the market. The era of interpreters and translators is upon us. It certainly must be if even AT&T has come to that conclusion. The company's telephone lines reach into virtually all foreign countries. Only a few of those countries use English as their daily language. If a would-be tourist from Japan or Korea wants to contact somebody by telephone at Yellowstone Park or at a hotel in San Francisco but cannot speak English, or an American would-be tourist needs to make some telephone inquiries in a non-English speaking country, an interpreter is needed. AT&T provides the interpreter together with the telephone connection and puts it on the same bill. This is a telling illustration of how the revolution in communication has increased the demand and the opportunity for applied language services between speakers of different languages.

Such services can only be supplied by individuals who have fluency in two or more languages. Thus, the profession of foreign language teacher is very much a part of this new equation. And because you are a part of this equation, it makes sense that you should inform yourselves on job opportunities for your students in interpreting and translating. The AATSP understands this. It is the reason why my colleagues and I have been invited to give presentations at your annual meetings. But that is only the appetizer. The main course is connecting up with the professions and the job opportunities in them in the region where you teach. Many of you are doing this already. And to those of you who have yet to start, I would like to say: do not just make a resolution to do so. Good resolutions are like babies crying in church. They need to be carried out.

Interpreting is a well-paid profession, especially if you can reach the upper skill levels. The current daily professional fee for conference interpreters in the United States is in the 500 dollar range. Staff salaries for top interpreters reach all the way up to \$90,000 per year. And daily fees and salaries are higher in Europe and the industrialized countries of Asia. Technical translators are in great demand while literary translators are not. This profession, too, generally pays better than teaching foreign languages. For translation, as contrasted with interpretation, there are good university courses available in many regions of the United States, but few young Americans know about this career path or get motivated by others to pursue it. As a result, there are so many unqualified translators to be found in this country. Somebody has to fill the vacuum.

In interpreting, particularly at the highest paid conference level, most of the gap created by the absence of trained Americans is filled by foreigners, mostly from Europe and Canada. Amateurs do not last long at this level because their poor performance is readily discerned. However, this is not the case at the lower skill levels of court interpreters, escort interpreters and community interpreters. It is in this arena, which accounts for over 80% of all daily interpreting done in the United States, where untrained individuals predominate and cause considerable damage in economic and human terms.

In the environment of court and immigration hearings, community emergencies, and the escorting of foreign visitors there are few bilingual or multilingual observers present who can detect inaccuracies, omissions, distortions and other poor performance. Many, if not most of the practitioners never passed a proficiency exam and were never certified by any impartial body. To a degree, the clients are at the mercy of the interpreters. Another problem in this environment is that trained foreign professionals rarely bother to enter it because pay and working conditions are often better in their own countries. Our immigration laws keep out many others.

A similar absence of quality controls exists with the users of written translations. As so few Americans have a comprehensive command of any foreign language, they usually do not know how poor a translation they have bought. Many translated business letters are more likely to produce mirth than merchandise when their foreign addressees eventually get to read them. Poor translations always lead to damage in economic productivity and in human relations.

All of us get exposed to this problem occasionally when we read English text which was composed by amateur translators. Two of my favorite commercial translations are, "Caution! Knife extremely sharp. Keep out of children!", and the European vacuum cleaner ad, "Nothing sucks like Electrolux". Here is an amateur translation on an immigration card, handed out to airline passengers by a Portuguese-speaking country. The Portuguese reads, "motivo da viagem"; the English says, "traveling object" instead of "purpose of trip". An exorbitant amount of translations of this quality are produced in the United States each year.

Let us now examine the mantle of neglect surrounding the professions of translation and interpretation in the United States and try to trace some of the causes for it. One cause can clearly be found in American history. The two professions simply started off on the wrong foot when they entered this continent from Europe.

When the European settlers arrived here and later the armies to protect them or to expand their territorial holdings, more communication needs existed with the native inhabitants of the Americas than between the settlers themselves. The professional translators and interpreters who had come along with the settlers did not speak the Indian languages. Amateurs had to do the job, no matter how little they knew about the languages involved or about accurately retaining and transmitting information.

When President Jefferson sent out the Lewis and Clark expedition, two European language interpreters went along but few interlocutors were encountered who spoke French or Spanish. The critical interpreter for the expedition became Sacajawea, the Indian wife of the French interpreter, not only because she spoke the Shoshonean language but because she had the cultural knowledge which allowed her to communicate with Indians who spoke other languages.

Dealing with the Indians also yielded little business for the translators. Though the Indians spoke many different languages, few were recorded in organized writing. The tribes had no libraries, lawyers or written land deeds. Thus, most professional translators remained confined to cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia and did not become part of the important scene for westbound military expeditions and business entrepreneurs. The important interpreters and occasional translators on that scene were virtually all untrained or self-trained amateurs. This started the notion, which is still prevalent across the nation today, that translators and interpreters are not professionals. Consequently they did not get the same respect accorded lawyers, engineers and teachers. Today, where many thousands of university-trained translators and interpreters cover a larger spectrum of the marketplace than ever before, this notion is no longer accurate, but it still prevails. One of the reasons that it still prevails is that many influential Americans frequently meet up with the untrained segment of the marketplace and extend that experience as being typical of the entire profession.

Now, the one entity in American society which should know that the notion is completely erroneous that translation and interpretation are not professions and do not require the same advanced training and intellectual acumen as other recognized professions, is academia. Its libraries are full of accounts of the exploits of famous translators and interpreters, most of whom were much better and much longer educated than the average university graduate who made a mark in history. Yet, in contrast to other civilized nations, the American academic community has yet to accord a modicum of respect to the professions of translation and interpretation. If they are admitted to the curriculum at all, they are shunted into a dark corner of the academic scene, underfunded and underrepresented. The few exceptions among the many hundreds of American universities and colleges I can count on the fingers of my hands.

Conversely, the language theoreticians, from etymologists to computational linguists, are an important and integral part of each campus. In the schools of languages and linguistics they not only outnumber the teachers of translation and interpretation by a large margin, they usually supervise them and often apportion the budget resources to them. Yet, in most cases, they have no thorough knowledge of the teaching requirements for the applied language professions.

Next to the unfortunate beginning of the professions in American history, their treatment and outright neglect by the academic community is the largest cause for the present sad state of affairs. And this is particularly true of interpretation, which has overtaken translation in the volume of daily demand in many regions of the country. In opera, even though many American students must get or finish their training in Europe and other places, they have some prestigious American music schools to go to. Where are the prestigious American university schools of interpretation? Why won't American universities train students who could earn a substantial income in the marketplace? Why do serious American students of the art have to go to Bradford, Copenhagen, Florence, Geneva, Heidelberg, Mainz, Mons, Montreal, Moscow, Ottawa, Paris, Vienna, and other prestigious university training programs overseas to become professionals? What is wrong with keeping those education dollars in the country?

The academic picture is somewhat better when it comes to university programs for translation. Equally underfunded and underrepresented, at least these programs exist in many regions of the country. Some are driven by local demands and offer introductory courses for Spanish only, particularly at state universities in California and Florida. A few are an appendix to programs which teach the skills of literary translation, such as at SUNY in Binghamton. Others have adapted to the current needs of our society and widened their curriculum and with it the scope of the marketability of their graduates. New York University, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, which probably is also our best interpreting school, Florida International University, and Montclair State University in New Jersey are four good examples.

**Much work remains to be done. Logic would dictate that if Europe finds about fifty good university programs still insufficient, so that the European Union is forced to train hundreds of interpreters in house to meet its yearly demand, the United States, which is an economic and population center of approximately the same size should need at least thirty more similar programs, and maybe more. We cannot forever refuse to make this investment and complain each year about our devastating deficits in the balance of trade and balance of payment. That deficit is mostly caused by our inaction, not by heinous acts of foreign nations. Most productive nations have learned how to export and we have not. It all begins with studying and mastering foreign languages and foreign business cultures. Without this and without the crucial contributions made by reliable interpreters and translators, major export successes are difficult, if not impossible to obtain. This is not theory. The empirical evidence can be found in the history of the world's great exporters.**

**How do we get from here to there? We all must make a contribution. The significant impetus, however, must come from another area of past neglect in matters of translation and interpretation in our society, the American business community. It has the greatest self-interest, the most immediate prospect of harvesting the benefits, the flexibility, the power, and the money. The private business sector is slowly awakening to this realization. Virtually all great initiatives in this country have come out of the private sector.**

**We, in government and education must build the bridges to the business community and share our knowledge with them. Neither the bureaucracies of government nor the equally cumbersome bureaucracies of academia have assembled a good track record in their efforts to address the problem of inaction and neglect in moving these important professions forward and promoting their growth and stature in society. It is time to pass the baton to the fastest runner.**

**All of us have a stake in this matter. The more voices are added to the chorus, the better the chance of being heard. The age of opportunity is here. We have but to seize it.**

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