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Translation vs. Interpretation: How Do They Differ?

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Translation vs. Interpretation: How Do They Differ?

There are many differences between translation and interpretation. Translation focuses on written content. It requires a high level of accuracy and can take time to produce. Interpretation deals with the spoken word and is delivered immediately. It prioritizes understanding and communication over perfection.

The biggest difference between interpretation and translation is each service's medium: interpreters translate spoken language orally, while translators translate the written word. Translators and interpreters require slightly different skill sets, but they share a deep cultural and linguistic understanding, expert knowledge of subject matter, and the ability to communicate clearly.

While the terms are often cited interchangeably, understanding the distinctions between these closely related linguistic fields is essential when choosing the service you need.

Interpretation

Interpretation is a service that happens in the moment. It is delivered live — either in unison with (simultaneous) or immediately after (consecutive) the original speech — with no help from scripts, dictionaries, or other reference materials. Professional interpreters need to transpose the source language (language to be translated) within context, preserving its original meaning but rephrasing idioms, colloquialisms, and other culturally-specific references in ways the target audience can

understand. An interpreter's only resources are experience, a good memory, and quick reflexes.

Interpreters work on projects involving live translation: Conferences and meetings, medical appointments, legal proceedings, live TV coverage, sign language.

Translation

Perhaps the biggest difference between interpreters and translators, then, is that most professional translators use computer-aided tools in their work. This involves converting the source content into a file type that's easy to work with (typically RTF), applying a translation memory (TM) to the text to automatically translate anything the tool has translated before, and filling in the gaps from scratch. As the translator goes through each section of text, they may refer to glossaries and [translation style guide templates](#) to ensure quality. Finally, they'll pass the translation to another linguist to proofread, then convert the final written document back into its original format ensuring the closest possible match.

Translators work on any information in written form: Websites, print, [video subtitles](#), software, multimedia.

Which service do I need?

So the differences between interpreting and translating are vast. To sum up, here are the five main distinctions to consider when determining which service is best suited to a project.

5 major differences between interpretation and translation

1. Format

Interpretation handles spoken language in real-time, while translation services are text-based.

2. Delivery

Interpretation takes place on the spot. The process can occur in person, over the phone, or via video. Translation, on the other hand, can happen long after the source text is created. This gives translators ample time to utilize technologies and reference materials to generate accurate, high-quality translations.

3. Accuracy

Interpretation requires a somewhat lower level of accuracy to translation. Interpreters aim for perfection, but it's challenging to achieve in a live setting — some of the original speech may be left out of the target language, for example. Again, time is on translators' side when reviewing and editing written text for accuracy.

4. Direction

Interpreters must be fluent in both the source and target language, as they're required to translate in both directions instantaneously without the aid of reference materials. Professional translators typically work in one direction: into their own mother tongue.

5. Intangibles

Making metaphors, analogies, and idioms resonate with the target audience is a challenge that both interpreters and translators face. On top of this, interpreters must capture tone, inflections, voice quality, and other unique elements of the spoken word and then convey these verbal cues to the audience.