

Buyer's Guide to Quality Translations©



“Translating is the process of crafting language to create parallel and equivalent mental structures. The question for the translator is not “how do you say that in...?”, but, rather, “how would it have been said, had it been said originally in...?”

- Sonia Barinas

This brief guide to the main principles of buying quality translations was written for busy executives who are faced with the need to contract translation or interpretation services.

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This Guide is an abridged version of Barinas's presentation to the 1986 World Conference on the Economics of Language Use, Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, United Nations, New York.

It gives an overview of the services, describes the different categories of translation suppliers, and discusses:

- How to set requirements,
- What to look for in a translator or translation company,
- What questions to ask,
- What to avoid,
- How to spot bad translators,
- What category of translator is right for you,
- How to obtain effective feedback from your end users,
- How to judge the competence of translators and interpreters by the terms they use.



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How to Set Requirements for Translations

Quality becomes a manageable factor when we define it as conformance to requirements. The quality of a translation must be defined by how well it meets the objectives we set for it, before the translation began. It is these objectives that must form the basis for formulating our requirements.

The 5 steps are

1. Define 6 key areas
2. Set requirements
3. Identify & hire the translator
4. Monitor the process
5. Evaluate results

Step 1: Define 6 Key Areas

Translations, as is also true of other professional services your company contracts, can be most effectively managed when you are prepared to give the supplier clear and precise directives. In the case of translations, there are 6 key areas that must be defined, and their requirements formulated, before the translation begins. I call these the 6 keys to translation management:

1. What?

First, gather all the elements that make up the complete translation project and define how they relate to the whole. For example, when translating a technical manual make sure to include the binder cover, index tabs, registration cards, or any other items that will be used together.

The translator must understand the interaction between all the elements and translate them as a unified whole. Otherwise, you may end up with a manual whose chapter headings do not quite match the language of the binder's index tabs, a CD whose graphics do not quite match the language used in dubbing the dialogue, and a brochure that matches neither.

2. Who?

Know your audience.

Do not assume that the target readership for your translation is the same as for the original. Adapt your translation to fit the income, class background, political orientation, etc. of the international market you are trying to reach.

Keep in mind that translating competence is much more than simple language competence. Your translator must understand your target country's lifestyle, psychological make-up, and buying habits as thoroughly as the original writer understood the US audience. Above all, keep in mind that a translation



must communicate to the target audience in terms of their own culture. Culture can never be separated from language.

We routinely blame some of the most famous blunders in the history of international business on ignorance of cultural differences. However, keep in mind that it is through poor translations that we expose our ignorance to public ridicule. Remember: Disastrous translations are much more frequently the result of cultural, rather than of technical ignorance.

3. Why?

Define the translation's purpose.

Why are you having it translated? What are your objectives? What do you expect the translation to accomplish? Sell? Teach? Persuade? Your objectives should form the basis for defining the translation style.

For example, a technical video translated for the purpose of teaching factory workers how to operate equipment, requires a style quite different from that of a video to be used to persuade CEO's of the technical superiority of the very same equipment. In the first instance, it is obvious that the style must be clear, simple, and straightforward. In the latter, however, the language must not only be at a much higher reading level, but also have a certain refinement and polish.

4. Where?

It is a common misconception that languages, such as Spanish, require translations into the various local dialects. This is not so. There is no valid reason for using dialect in business communications or when translating professional or technical documents, such as contracts, research, or financial reports.

Business communications, in any major language, require the same standards of clarity, precision, and professionalism. Translators must have a thorough knowledge of the countries, regions, and dialects represented by the target audience, not in order to translate into dialect, but, on the contrary, to translate into universal standard language and to avoid particular words that may offend or lead to misunderstandings because of their different meanings in various dialects.

5. When?

Plan ahead in order to establish a realistic and cost-effective translation schedule. Keep in mind that quality, cost, and schedule are the three pillars on which a translation project is developed.

As a rule of thumb, allow one day for every 20 pages of text and one week for every 20 minutes of video, or 3 weeks for a 300-page manual or a 60-minute video. Add to this timetable any time some of your field or staff people may want to spend revising first and second drafts of the translation.

Whenever possible, do not start translating a manual or video until the entire original production is completed. Nine times out of ten, there will be last-minute changes to the original, and it can be very costly to make changes to the translation. In any case, no competent translator would dream of doing a



dubbing script without the final video, since each word of the translation must match the lip movements of the original.

6. How much?

How much should a translation cost? There can be huge variations in fees charged by translators and, as is true in other areas, high fees are no guarantee of quality. Often, "translation brokers" (agencies run by people who are not themselves qualified translators), such as the nationally known language schools, charge the highest fees and produce the lowest quality. Translators who "do translations on the side" usually charge the lowest fees, but their performance may be less than adequate, and large, complex projects are normally beyond their scope of competence.

When formulating your budget, you may find it useful to get quotes from these two extremes, but make sure that you are making an accurate comparison of the services they each provide. What are they offering you for the money? Does the fee include typesetting? Will they supervise the printing? Will they culturally adapt the foreign version for that fee? Does that include consultations on cultural and economic factors that may affect how your product or service should be presented abroad?

The main point to keep in mind is that the actual text or script translation represents a very small fraction of your total budget, compared to production and distribution costs. While you will often pay less for a translation by going to a friend or local university for small, simple jobs, in a major project, a full-service translation company, run by a qualified translator who knows the ins and outs of the business can save you money. A big part of the service provided by reputable translation companies is putting together a comprehensive package.

In addition, a good translation company will have access to production facilities in several countries, and will be able to design the most cost-effective way for you to print, produce, distribute, etc. the translated product. As in other business functions, we arrive at the true cost of a translation by computing the price paid to achieve conformance to requirements, plus the cost of non-conformance.

Translation non-conformance, however, must be measured in two ways: First, in terms of the direct costs incurred because of errors, omissions, delays, etc. Second, and even more significantly, it must be measured in terms of the impact of non-conformance on the entire business process.

Step 2: Set Requirements

Once you have defined the 6 key areas, you can begin to set the requirements for your translation. Let us take a hypothetical case and define requirements for it, as in the following example.

Product Requirements Sample:

(What) Translation into Universal Technical Spanish of a sales presentation consisting of 50 pages of text, a 15-minute video (part dubbing, part voiceovers, some graphics), 50 slides.



(Who) The language must correspond to the language currently used in medical device journals sold in Latin America and Spain. The first presentation will be facilitated by a Cuban-American chemical engineer and will be given to Mexican, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, and Spanish medical device design engineers (mechanical engineers) and engineering managers.

(Why) The presentation must introduce them to new polymers developed by our company for use in medical devices, and sell these engineers on the idea of incorporating them into future designs.

(Where) The presentation must be adaptable to formal and informal settings, for both small and large audiences in the US, Europe and Latin America. Presentation will be made for the first time during a September trade show in San Antonio, TX, to engineers from Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Spain, but we plan to use it in all other Spanish-speaking countries on an on-going basis.

(When) The completed package must be ready by _____.

(How Much) The total project must stay within a budget of \$_____.

In addition to the above, you will need to define format requirements for the finished product. For example, in the case of text you may need to specify a style sheet, any artwork, etc. In the case of a video, you will need to specify the size and format of the master, etc.

Step 3: Identify and Hire the Translator

Once you have set your requirements for the product, you will be ready to set requirements for the translator, based on what the translator must accomplish. Now, let us continue with our example:

Translator Requirements Sample:

- Translator must have knowledge, skill, and experience in the translation of technical text, videos, and slides from English into Spanish.
- Translator must be familiar with writings by ChemE's and ME's from the US and Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Spain.
- Translator must understand the technical sales process and the language of technical sales in the above countries.
- Translator must be familiar with trade show presentations and the best ways of approaching the different settings.
- Translator must have the project completed by _____.
- Translator must be able to work within the budget.
- Translator must deliver the finished product in the format stated.

Now, you are ready to begin searching for a translator.

As we have stated, the decision to hire a translator should be determined by the requirements of the translation. As such, the translator you hire must be defined by the complexity of the translation, that is, the level of skill, expertise, and technical knowledge that the work demands. Furthermore, the



translator must also be defined by how well you want the translation to conform to all its requirements. A quality translation must achieve a perfect match between the requirements of the finished product and the ability of the translator to fulfill those requirements.

Step 4: Monitor the Process

In translations, this is the one step that is most often neglected, and it is also the most complex. Monitoring the translation process is much more than staying on schedule. It can be divided into 6 main areas:

1. Task Definition
(Defining each individual task that makes up the total project)
2. Task Sequencing
(Determining the order in which tasks must be completed)
3. Task Scheduling
(Determining the time required to complete each task, as well as the date when each task must be begun and the date when it must be completed)
4. Task Evaluation
(Determining what milestones will define each task and, at each milestone, whether the task is being carried out according to the requirements)
5. Task Approval
(Determining at what point each task can be defined as completed and ready to be integrated into the next step in the process)
6. Task Integration
(Determining when and how each task is integrated into the next step in the process. Evaluating whether the integration has been carried out according to requirements)

When translating simple text, process monitoring can be extremely simple, since there are such few tasks involved. In the case of large or complex projects, however, it is much too involved a step and beyond the scope of this brief guide. Suffice it to say that lack of proper total quality process management will not only result in chaos, delays, and lower quality, but will also end up being very costly. Unless you have the training, skill, and knowledge that will allow you to know exactly how long each task should take and how it should be sequenced, coupled with time to devote to coordinating the hundreds of individual tasks involved in a major translation project, find a competent translation company to do it for you.



Demand that the company provide you with detailed project monitoring charts that give you a clear picture of the complete process. Moreover, make sure it is done before the project starts. That way you will be able to follow each step of the translation, or better yet, know that a competent translation company is following it for you. It is here that the true worth of a translation company can be measured: by their ability to take full responsibility for the quality, cost, and on-time delivery of the finished product.

Step 5: Evaluate Results

Evaluating the quality of a translation should be the easy part.

Once the translation is completed, check it against the requirements that you set for it. Then, determine whether or not it conforms to these requirements. It is to be hoped that, if all the steps have been followed correctly, the translation will, consequently, conform to all the requirements and, therefore, will be a quality translation.

If it does not conform, then go back and determine which part of the translation caused the non-conformance, and make the needed changes to this part of your process to prevent the same error in the future. Of course, if you have gotten this far before detecting the defect, you will be forced to correct it at a very high cost to you and your company. Obviously, whatever time, money, and effort are spent in correcting the defect will have to be computed under "the price of non-conformance."



How to Work with Translators

There is no magic rule for distinguishing between the top world-class translator and the marginally competent, but knowing more about the different types of translators will allow you to make a better-informed decision.

Before you set out to walk through the minefield of translation services providers, answer this question: How important is this translation? While a friend, secretary or language teacher can often do an adequate job of translating simple text; few businesses can afford the high cost of putting an important project into the hands of amateurs.

First, let's divide the most common translation services providers into 4 general categories.

1. Language Schools cum Translation Agencies

Language schools often provide translation services alongside their language teaching, and profit from the general misconception that anyone who can speak a foreign language can translate it. Usually, the schools act as brokers; the actual work is done by native speakers of the target language, hired by the schools to teach their courses and translate, if the need arises.

Avoid translation services that make statements such as "translations by native speakers". Is every native English speaker a qualified writer? Is every non-native English speaker a qualified translator?

One can usually spot these schools by their boasts of "teachers and translators with native fluency". In this type of arrangement, the average fees charged by schools with nationally recognized names are from 20 to as much as 30 cents per word, depending on the language, size of the project, and level of difficulty. Those who translate for these brokers are sometimes paid as little as 4 cents a word, and rarely more than 10.

2. Universities

Most universities keep lists of faculty members, and sometimes students, who "do translations on the side". College professors can be fairly adequate and, sometimes, low-cost translators on minor projects, but they can be a very risky gamble on major projects.

In the first place, they are not translators. Secondly, their technical knowledge is normally very low, and their language is often out of touch with current technical and business usage. Third, they lack the professional knowledge to manage a major translation project, so that the client ends up holding their hands through scheduling, production coordination, deadlines, etc. Fourth, they simply lack the practical knowledge of world corporate issues, international business trends, and total quality management that are essential for an effective translator.



3. Freelancers

Some freelancers are top-notch professionals; while some, who call themselves translators, are unemployable incompetents in search of odd jobs. How can you tell who's who? As in contracting for any outside professional services, of course, get references, work samples, credentials, etc. Even more important, talk to the translator. Make sure he or she understands your corporate culture, your technology, and your clients. Although the good translator is elusive, the bad translator is often quite easy to spot.

What to Look for in a Translator

- Beware of "on the side syndrome". Never hire someone who tells you "I'm an engineer (or lawyer, CPA, teacher, etc.) and I do translations on the side. Do hire someone who tells you "I am a translator, and I also have a degree in engineering (law, accounting, etc.)"
- Beware of boasts of "native fluency". Thinking that being fluent in a language is sufficient qualification for translating is the same as believing that knowing how to hammer in a nail qualifies a person as a builder.
- Beware of boasts of professional affiliations. Do not be misled by boasts of professional affiliation. The American Translators Association and other similar groups, although doing very valuable work in upgrading professional standards, are open to anyone who wishes to pay the membership fee, regardless of qualifications. In short, what does membership in the American Translators Association mean? It means that the person sent in a check and it cleared the bank. Period.
- Beware of boasts of "accreditation". Some freelancers advertise themselves as being "accredited translators". What does this mean? It means that they have passed a basic test of knowledge of translation into English or into another of the languages for which tests are given by the American Translators Association. Although the American Translators Association has made great advances towards defining professional competence, working with a translator who holds ATA accreditation does not guarantee that the work will achieve the desired quality. ATA rules, by the way, prohibit translators from representing themselves as being simply "accredited," and require, instead, that translators state the language pair for which they have received accreditation.
- Beware of those calling themselves "Certified Translators" or "Certified Interpreters". There is no officially recognized certification program for translators in the US. The only federal certification program for interpreters in existence in the US is for court interpreters working in US district courts and does not apply to any other type of translation or interpretation. According to the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination Manual (1991-1993, p. 5): "What this means is that bilingual language proficiency and interpreting performance is measured according to standards of minimum competency set by practicing court interpreters and conference interpreters, language specialists, and members of the judiciary. Certification is given in Spanish-English and Creole-English."



- Beware of "on the side syndrome". Never hire someone who tells you "I'm an engineer (or lawyer, CPA, teacher, etc.) and I do translations on the side. Do hire someone who tells you "I am a translator, and I also have a degree in engineering (law, accounting, etc.)"

4. Translation Companies

Translation companies are only as good as their owner. I suggest using the same criteria to judge them as for freelancers. In addition, a translation company must be able to provide total project management. This means that the owner must be a seasoned translation manager, who will help you define the project requirements, monitor the translation process, and deliver the final product on time, within budget and in conformance to requirements.

These advantages become more obvious, and indispensable, on large or complex projects. On small jobs, the advantages may be negligible, and you may be able to do just as well with a competent freelancer. However, if your translation is large, you have a tight schedule, or require typesetting, printing, special equipment, etc., a translation company may, in the end, save you money by handling all facets of the project. The main additional points to keep in mind when dealing with translation companies are as follows:

3 Main Rules for Choosing Translation Companies

1. Avoid language schools-cum-translation agencies. The best you will generally get from them is "native speakers".
2. Avoid agencies that translate birth and marriage certificates, school transcripts, etc. If they were competent to do corporate work, they would not be working at the bottom of the profession.
3. Beware of non-translators acting as translation brokers. I have known of a former carpet layer, a former piano teacher, and a former make-up artist, among others, who have opened "translation agencies". They usually stay in business long enough to do a lot of damage to unwary clients.



What to Expect from Translation Project Management

The four main components of effective translation project management are

1. Consistency

If your translation needs are more complex, you will achieve better quality by having all the products (manuals, videos, slides, brochures, etc.) translated as an integrated whole. A competent translation company will formulate a glossary of terms specifically for your company, update it as needed, and guarantee uniform quality throughout your products year after year. Multiple suppliers cannot do this.

2. Comprehensiveness

One of the most difficult problems in translation project management is task sequencing, or determining what needs to be done first, what next, etc. If your project involves multiple elements, it can be extremely costly to try to source out multiple suppliers and manage it yourself. Even a simple mistake, for example, translating the video script before completing the final editing of the manual, can be very costly.

3. Precise budgeting

Formulating a translation budget is a complex process. Even a simple average technical manual requires a budget that includes, in addition to fees for translator and translation editor, the costs of artwork, typesetting, paper, and printing. It must also include the purchase price of blank binders, artist's fees, art work production costs, and costs of printing or hot stamping binder cover and binder spine. Add to that costs for chapter separators, and again, artwork, typesetting and printing. Then there is the title page design, artwork, printing, etc. A project with multiple elements requires very complex budgeting, and you will save money in the long run by hiring a competent translation company that will formulate a detailed budget as part of its service.

4. Selection

A competent translation company, when translating videos, will first determine your requirements and then give you a range of price and quality options, and will explain each one in detail. Depending on your needs, and on the original, they may contract with an overseas translation studio for all, or part, of the studio production. They sometimes may hire a freelance dubbing translator or they may do it in-house. Make sure you know your options and costs BEFORE the project starts. A reputable translation company will give you a written contract with a firm price and a detailed project description, including the resumes of any freelancers hired to work on your project.

Translation Project Management of Complex Multipart Translation Projects

We define multipart translations as those that contain different elements, as for example training packages that include manuals, videos, PowerPoint® presentations, tests, etc.



In order to achieve optimal quality, multipart translations must be managed as an integrated whole by applying proper translation project management and a comprehensive approach to language, including vocabulary, syntax, and style. Some of the more common types of multipart translations are

International Bids

The preparation of an international bid is a complex and costly process and the quality of the translation is often vital to its success. To ensure that the quality of the translation is equivalent to the quality of the original, the translation of an international bid must be managed as a multipart translation

For a US company, it must begin with the translation into English of the RFP. Many companies have been disqualified from the bid process by cutting corners and having a bilingual employee translate the RFP, only to find out later that the person did not understand the RFP as well as he may have thought.

Just as an international bid is normally prepared by three distinct departments in a company (legal, financial, and technical), so must its translation be done by legal, financial, and technical (or medical, if applicable) translators.

It is also essential to have the right type of specialized translators and a translation manager who can generate and maintain glossaries; select, coordinate, and supervise the translators; and generally ensure that the project stays on schedule and conforms to all the requirements.

Videos and Digital Multimedia

The translation of corporate and training videos demands translators who can combine translating competence with knowledge, skill and experience in sound and video production and post-production, as well as the techniques required for synchronizing the translation to the original's on-screen lip movements, if any.

Video translations include:

1. Voiceovers,
2. Language dubbing,
3. Sub-titles,
4. Graphics,
5. Original production.



Choosing a Video Translation Supplier

When contracting for video translation services, it is essential to be aware of the differences between the 4 main categories of suppliers, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each, before selecting the one that best suits your needs.

Sound Studios

Sound studios are in the business of recording music, radio ads, TV off-camera announcers (voiceovers), etc. Those that offer translation to their clients, either subcontract the whole project to a translation company, or hire a freelancer to do the work in their studios.

Video Studios

Video studios produce TV ads, training videos, etc. They handle translations the same way that sound studios do, and there can be huge variations in the quality of the product. In the worst case I know, the owner hires "native speakers" to translate the script and record the dialogue, and "directs" the production himself. His videos make late-night Kung Fu movies look polished.

Video & Film Translation Studios

These specialized studios translate films and videos exclusively. Therefore, their translators, actors, directors, technicians, etc. are all specialists and can produce top-quality work. One drawback to hiring them directly is that, if your translation needs go beyond just video and sound, you will need to have 2 or more translation suppliers, to cover videos, manuals, etc. This will make it extremely difficult to translate all the elements as a unified whole and is the surest way to end up with video dialogue that does not match the manual. Another consideration is that video and film translation studios specialize in feature films and TV programs, and are very rarely called upon to translate technical or corporate videos. As a result, when they do, they tend to sacrifice content for the sake of form. Finally, the top studios are all located in the various foreign countries, and direct access to their services is normally both too difficult and too time-consuming for the average company.

Translation Companies

Perhaps it is in video translations that grades of quality become most apparent. The advantages of working with a competent translation company are detailed in the next page. The guidelines for translation companies can also serve to spot the translation brokers and other unscrupulous operators. Reputable companies will provide, as part of their service and at no additional cost, full and complete project management. It is their expertise in project management that you are paying for. If your translation company is not providing this service, you should be looking for one that does.



Translating Training Packages

A training package is made up of all the elements used in a training class. This normally includes a manual, slides, handouts, videos, etc. It may also include tests, a binder, registration cards, and any number of odds and ends.

It is crucial for training packages to be translated as an integrated whole, otherwise you may end up with one term used in the manual, and a different term used in the test.

It is also essential to have the right type of specialized translators and a translation manager who can generate and maintain glossaries; select, coordinate, and supervise the translators; and generally ensure that the project stays on schedule and conforms to all the requirements.



Most Frequently Asked Questions on Translations

Are your translations done by native speakers?

Obviously, native language competence, is an essential requirement for translating competence, but in addition to language competence, the translator must have experience, training, and knowledge of translation and of the subject matter of the source text.

Being a native speaker of a language does not qualify a person to translate into that language any more than being a native speaker of English qualifies a person to write, for example a technical manual, a financial statement, or a contract.

Our translations are done by professional translators working into their dominant, or native languages. Although professional translators usually work into their native languages, it is not native language, but dominant language and native language competence that must be considered.

Aren't native speakers supposed to be the best translators?

Professional translators do their best work when translating into their dominant language which may or may not be their native language.

Conversely, being a native speaker does not endow a person with native language competence, much less with translating competence.

What is a good translation?

We define a good translation as one that transfers the meaning of a text from one language into another and does it fully, completely, accurately, and in equivalent language.

To accomplish this, a translation must bridge the gap that separates the writer of the original from the target readership by converting the source text into its equivalent in the target language.

This concept of equivalence is very important, since the gap between languages may have many components (economic, cultural, statutory, technical, etc.) depending on the type of text and on its function.

How to Obtain Effective Feedback on Translations

We all agree that feedback from the end users is important in judging the quality of the finished product, but how does a company obtain effective feedback on the translations it contracts out?

Sometimes companies will ask "native speakers" to read the translation and tell them if it's any good, and then have to contend with conflicting evaluations. The problem usually is that the evaluators are



either not qualified to judge, or afraid to offend. Many times, although native speakers, they are people who have lived in the US for years and have lost touch with their native language, or never knew it very well, particularly if they were educated in the US. Other companies have simply given up after years of struggling with the problem and have opted to take the approach that, unless someone complains, the translation must have been OK.

Remember that your end user is not a qualified translator and is not judging the translation, but only the finished product. The fact is that the average end user of a translation has no idea how to go about judging it, and usually gives an opinion based on politeness, orneriness, desire to please, or any number of other factors. If you prefer a more systematic approach, the following questions will help you to obtain effective feedback from your end users:

Questions to ask about a translation:

1. Can you tell it is a translation?

This is the most important question to ask, as a competent translation never reveals that it is a translation. A good translation should read like an original.

2. Does it read like an original?

This question reinforces the previous one, as a competent translation reads like an original.

3. Are there any words or phrases that sound out of place?

Proper usage is the mark of a good translation. An incompetent translator will look words up in a dictionary; a competent translator will know which is the right word to use.

4. Is there anything that does not make sense?

Incompetent translators who do not know proper usage will often translate a phrase word for word, which will make no sense.

5. Are there sentences that are hard to understand?

Improper usage will make the text hard to understand.

6. Are there phrases that you understand but that you would never say that way?

Again, this evaluates proper usage.

7. Are there sentences with words that seem out of order?

Word order is extremely important, not only in conveying the correct meaning, but also in giving you a text that runs smoothly.



8. Are there any grammatical mistakes?

This question is only significant when the answer is yes. Acceptable grammar is much easier to produce than acceptable usage.

9. Are there any misspelled words?

Again, a question that is only significant when the answer is yes.



Simultaneous Interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation is a highly specialized area of translations, which requires accurate and complete translation, orally and at the same rate of speech as the speaker, with only a few seconds of lag time.

Simultaneous interpreters must have, not only complete mastery of the languages, but also of their cultures. In addition, they must have technical knowledge of the subject to be discussed, as well as the required simultaneous interpretation training, skill, and experience.

However, even the best simultaneous interpreters cannot do a proper job unless they have appropriate equipment. Therefore, simultaneous interpretation must be approached as a coherent whole.

This means that interpreters and interpretation equipment must be selected and designed to work together for the specific interpretation project.

The question often arises of why we need specialized technical simultaneous interpreters for certain jobs. Many times clients have been told by other interpretation providers that good simultaneous interpreters can do any type of interpretation, as long as they are given a glossary of terms.

This is a question that needs clarification, as many disreputable agencies and equipment companies use the omniscience of their simultaneous interpreters as one of their big selling points. Sometimes, they'll argue that they can save the client money by using local interpreters; other times, they'll claim to have interpreters on staff for all subjects and languages.

Don't believe it.

Not long ago we bid on a three-day meeting in San Antonio, Texas dealing with chemical engineering research. The other agency bidding against us used the argument, most convincingly, that their simultaneous interpreters were not only local (thus saving the client travel expenses), but also so experienced that all they needed was a glossary of terms. We, on the other hand, told the client that their topic required specialized technical interpreters and that there were no simultaneous interpreters in San Antonio with the required qualifications.

The prospective client did not believe us; they even told us that we were inflating the cost by pretending to bring people in from out of town when the other agency had told them that there were "hundreds of qualified interpreters right there." Naturally, the other agency was awarded the contract.

But that was not the end of the story.

On the first morning of the meeting our telephone rang. It was the meeting organizer asking us if there was any way that we could take over. He explained that they had to stop the meeting, since the interpreters weren't keeping up with the speeches; they were interpreting sporadic bits and pieces of the talks and the foreign delegates said that even when they did try to interpret, what they said made no sense.



Stories such as this have become all too common in the past couple of years, as more and more people fall prey to disreputable agencies willing to say and promise anything to win a contract. Don't believe them: No simultaneous interpreter worthy of the name will claim to be able to handle all subjects.

Technical simultaneous interpreters are simultaneous interpreters with in-depth knowledge of a particular technical field. Competence as a simultaneous interpreter is not enough.

It is impossible to interpret a speech, unless the interpreter has an extensive knowledge of the technology involved and the latest background information in both the source language and the target language. Only the interpreter who fulfills those criteria is a technical simultaneous interpreter.

Above all, make sure that you are not dealing with a broker.

All a broker-agency will do is subcontract your meeting by bits and pieces. This is the surest way to have your interpretation fall apart!

The 3 Types of Simultaneous Interpretation Services Providers

When working with conference interpreters, it is essential to understand the 3 main categories of conference interpretation services providers.

1. Audiovisual & Interpretation Equipment Rental Companies

Regardless of whether their primary business is interpretation equipment or audiovisual equipment with interpretation equipment as a sideline, these companies are in the business of renting equipment. If they also provide interpreters along with the hardware, it is of secondary importance.

Their main drawback is that the people who run these companies are usually experts in equipment who have no knowledge of interpretation and, therefore, are not able to judge the competence of the freelancers they hire. As such, they hire interpreters who present themselves as being able to do the job, and have no way of knowing whether or not the interpreter is, in fact, as competent as he or she claims to be, since they have no knowledge of the complexities of interpretation and interpreters.

Besides lacking the knowledge to select the best interpreter for the job, equipment companies cannot prepare, supervise, or give the interpreters guidance, before or during the conferences. The freelancers they hire are on their own and must make do as best they can. Even a top interpreter has a hard time doing acceptable work under these circumstances.

What is worse, many rental companies are more concerned with their bottom line than with the caliber of their interpreters and tend to hire low paid freelancers of barely marginal competence.

2. Freelance Interpreters

By contracting a freelancer directly, you maintain better control over the quality of the interpretation and have first-hand contact with the persons who will be ultimately doing the work. On the other hand,



you will still need to rent the interpretation equipment and do all the necessary coordination (languages, channels, frequencies, installation, technicians, etc.)

Can you do all the work yourself? Not unless you are an experienced meeting planner with extensive knowledge of interpretation equipment and interpreters.

Can you save money by doing it yourself? You could, by renting equipment and technician services from a reputable simultaneous interpretation company.

3. Simultaneous Interpretation Companies

Can be your best choice, because they will coordinate all the aspects of the interpretation, as well as provide you with the expertise needed to avert problems and solve any that may come up. In addition, you will be in a better position to negotiate a volume discount with a single supplier. In addition, a reputable interpretation company will provide the highest quality interpretation.

However, not all those who claim to be interpretation companies are. Very often, the same people described above when discussing translators, are not above trying their hand at a bit of interpreting. Therefore, before you hire an interpretation company, make sure that:

- They own the equipment (and are not simply renting it from a third party)
- They have their own technicians.
- They manage all aspects of the interpretation.
- They provide a list of references for work done in the past 5 years, or more.
- Their equipment is in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act.
- Their equipment is in compliance with ISO 4043.
- The owner is an interpreter and will personally ensure the proper management of your meeting.

Above all, make sure that you are not dealing with a broker. All a broker-agency will do is sub-contract your meeting by bits and pieces. This is the surest way to have your interpretation fall apart!

How to Obtain Effective Feedback on Simultaneous Interpretation

Often, feedback forms are handed out at meetings and conventions asking the participants to judge the quality of the simultaneous interpretation by checking the box labeled excellent, good, fair, or poor. The assumption is that these are people who have come to the US for a convention about their field of expertise, and that obviously they would know if the interpretation was any good. Wouldn't they?

Questions about the Interpreters

Simultaneous Interpreters: Did the interpreter keep up with the speaker?

Did the interpreter speak whenever the speaker spoke?

Did the interpreter pause whenever the speaker paused or shortly after?



Did you hear any hesitation in the interpreter's voice?

Did the interpreter use any words or phrases that sounded strange to you?

During slide presentations, were the interpreter's words well-timed?

Did the interpreter mispronounce any words?

Did the interpreter have a pleasant, well-modulated voice?

Did the interpreter have a cultured voice and accent?

Questions about the Equipment

Was there any time when your equipment did not work?

Was there any time when you had trouble hearing?

Was the sound over the headphones loud enough?

Did you hear any crackling noise or interference in your headphones?

Did you hear any background noise coming over your headphones?

Did the interpreter's voice ever sound muffled or distorted?

