ATA61: Making Your Welfare a Priority

As most of you know by now, we have canceled the in-person conference in Boston and decided to hold ATA61 as a virtual conference. While I’ll leave it to ATA President-Elect Madalena Sánchez Zampaulo to provide the details on how the virtual conference will be structured (see page 4), I do want to explain why the Board of Directors had to wait so long to make the decision.

Under the terms of our contracts with the conference hotel and other conference service providers, the Association would have had to pay penalties or cancelation fees of about $500,000 if we canceled the event absent a government ban or other “good cause.” Even mentioning plans to cancel could have had adverse financial consequences. We were thus forced to continue to plan an in-person event while we negotiated with the conference hotel.

Experient, our event management partner, and ATA Headquarters were finally able to negotiate acceptable cancelation terms with the conference hotel. They would waive any penalty if we would agree to hold the conference at the hotel in 2025. Once the massive financial loss was no longer a concern, the Board was able to make the decision many of you had wanted us to make sooner.

While we always make the welfare of our members our main priority, the Board also had a fiduciary responsibility to avoid incurring such massive financial penalties if possible. That’s why we had to wait as long as we did to make the decision.

I’m confident that while a virtual ATA61 will be a different experience for attendees, it will provide just as much, if not more, value to attendees. I look forward to seeing you there virtually!

With respect to the economic impact of the pandemic, even in light of the recent uptick in infections and some rollbacks of business reopenings, I remain optimistic about the prospects for the economic recovery of the translation and interpreting industry.

The downturn in national economies of developed countries appears to have slowed and the first, faltering steps are being taken on the path to recovery and a return to normalcy. While it is likely to take years for the global economy to return to pre-pandemic levels, any uptick is welcome news to the translation and interpreting industry, which is inextricably tied to global trade. A survey by CSA Research1 showed that 52% of respondents, mainly language services companies, expect enterprise language spending will either increase or stay the same over the next 12 months.

Here in the U.S., an unexpectedly high increase in hiring (in many cases, rehiring) in May and the loosening of lockdown restrictions on businesses give cause for cautious optimism that the economy and society may slowly return to normal over the coming months.

The pandemic is not the only crisis our members are facing. In California, our efforts to advocate for an exemption for professional translators and interpreters from the devastating economic effects of AB 5 have had mixed results. Senate Bill 900, which would have provided an exemption for translators and interpreters, was shelved by California’s Senate Labor Committee in May. Other proposed amendments to AB 5 were also shelved or killed in committee. It appears that only Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, the sponsor of AB 5, will be allowed to propose amendments that have any chance of being passed by the legislature.

Her proposed amendments in AB 1850 include an exemption for “certified translators” under the professional services provisions. While the inclusion of translators under “professional services” is a major victory in itself—certainly compared with being included under “referral services” along with pet sitters—the complete exclusion of interpreters is unacceptable. We will continue our advocacy efforts, and we strongly encourage each and every professional translator and interpreter in California to contact their representatives in the California Senate and Assembly and demand that the exemption be expanded to include all professional translators and interpreters.

NOTES
FEATURES

6
ATA Resolution Supporting Diversity
ATA stands in solidarity with our members and colleagues who are Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BiPOC), as well as those in the communities they serve.

7
Treasurer's Report
In addition to reviewing ATA's finances for the first six months of the current fiscal year, we'll also look at how our financial situation might be impacted moving forward in light of the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic.

12
Certification Consultant’s Statement on the Membership Requirement for ATA Certification
Is ATA's history of requiring membership as a condition of eligibility for certification consistent with current practices and standards for professional certification programs? Earlier this year, ATA asked a certification consultant to prepare an opinion on the subject. Here is her analysis.

14
Member Opinions: Discussion on Opening ATA’s Exam to Nonmembers
In the November/December issue, the Board encouraged members to submit their opinions, both pro and con, regarding opening ATA's certification exam to nonmembers. Member feedback is important to the discussion, so share your thoughts!

16
New Twists on Old Scams: Language Professionals Beware!
Some scammers are finding new target audiences because a lot of people are working from home who have not worked from home before. While the current scams are not new, some scammers are adding new twists.

18
Five Strategies for Adapting to Uncertainty
One thing is certain: we’re living in uncertain times. But the ups and downs of freelancing can be turned into opportunities for growth as we step back and take inventory of our work and our professional choices. What steps should you take to make sure you’re making the most of unexpected changes to workflow?

20
Going All in to Help Asylum Seekers at the U.S.-Mexico Border
For trained translators and interpreters, there’s a special role to play at the U.S.-Mexico border, whether on the ground or remotely. If you are uncertain if this work is for you, it's surprising how many skills you already use that overlap into this area.

25
Remote Simultaneous Interpreting Hubs or Platforms: What’s the Best Option?
We can see remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) as a threat or an opportunity. History shows that resisting change only places us behind those who embrace it. So, let's consider RSI an opportunity and contribute to making it a good solution for clients and another work tool for interpreters in an ever-changing world.

29
Future Tense: Thriving Amid the Growing Tension between Language Professionals and Intelligent Systems
What do you need to do to thrive as a language services provider in the future? It's time to shed the self-defeating attitude toward technology and focus on new opportunities for fulfilling the changing needs for language services.

COLUMNS

2
From the President

4
From the President-Elect

4
ATA Social Media

5
From the Executive Director

33
Interpreters Forum

34
Geekspeak

36
Resource Review

38
Certification Forum

ADVERTISING DIRECTORY

32 DePaul University
http://go.depaul.edu/languages

39 Alliant
http://ata.alliant.com

Looking for Member News and Humor and Translation? These columns are found in the Chronicle-Online edition: www.atanet.org/chronicle-online!
ATA61 Goes Virtual

This year we’ve all been met with a lot of uncertainty. As president-elect and Annual Conference organizer, I’ll tell you that a global pandemic and economic crisis were not the challenges I expected we would face this year in planning ATA61. As the number of COVID-19 cases in the U.S. continues to climb, your health and well-being remain our top priority. With this in mind, and in order to bring some certainty to our Annual Conference event, ATA’s Board of Directors has decided to shift from a “hybrid” (in-person and virtual) model to a fully virtual conference model this year.

We could not make this decision earlier in the year due to the huge financial cancelation penalties ATA would have incurred if we had canceled without a contractually-stipulated cause. The conference hotel has now agreed to waive cancelation penalties if we agree to hold our Annual Conference at their hotel in 2025, the next available date. The removal of this financial barrier allowed us to focus solely on the health and well-being of our conference attendees, sponsors, exhibitors.

With this new-to-ATA delivery format, and knowing conference attendees appreciate the educational content available, our main focus will be to deliver a large variety of sessions that will appeal to our diverse membership. While it may not be possible to provide all 174 regular sessions for the virtual conference, our goal will be to provide as many sessions as possible that attendees will find useful and stimulating. The remote conference features aim to make sessions incredibly interactive and accessible. You’ll be able to participate in session Q&As and even send your questions to speakers after their session if they were unable to answer them live. You’ll also be able to see which sessions are in progress and start viewing them immediately, switch between session rooms just as you would if you attended in person, and more. And, of course, if you can’t make it to a session during the livestream, you can watch the recording later!

Our virtual Exhibit Hall will allow you to chat with vendors and tools representatives and ask questions about their products or services. Our conference sponsors will also be highlighted on the virtual conference site so that remote attendees can learn more about them and what they provide.

Finally, it wouldn’t be an Annual Conference without the networking and camaraderie we all enjoy so much. The virtual conference will include remote networking and social gatherings for attendees, just as we always have when meeting in person. Divisions are encouraged to organize virtual social gatherings in lieu of the popular annual division dinners we all enjoy.

As conference organizer, I assure you that we’ll do everything possible to make the virtual conference as enjoyable and beneficial as possible for attendees.

Despite the uncertainty and unknowns 2020 has brought, we’re excited to have made this decision and to bring some certainty and excitement to the format of the Annual Conference. One thing is for sure—ATA61 will be one for the books!

Your health and well-being remain our top priority. With this in mind, ATA’s Board of Directors has decided to shift ATA’s Annual Conference from an in-person event to a fully virtual conference model this year.
Conference Planning During a Pandemic

What crazy times! Typically in this issue, we would announce that conference registration is open and start promoting early registration discounts, program highlights, and various networking events. This year, like everything else, plans were fluid.

But we now have some certainty. At press time for this issue, ATA’s Board of Directors approved moving this year’s Annual Conference online.

The Board’s decision was not taken lightly. As the pandemic continued over the past month, the Board acted as swiftly as possible to make the change. (Please see ATA President Ted Wozniak and ATA President-Elect Madalena Sánchez Zampaulo’s columns for more details on moving the conference online, including working with the conference hotel in Boston to make the change.)

As part of our planning, ATA Headquarters has been working with our meeting vendors since late March on the logistics of offering livestreamed and virtual sessions. To be clear, livestreamed sessions are live broadcasts of in-person sessions. ATA61 sessions will be aired in real time from wherever the speakers are located. For this year’s Annual Conference, all the 100-plus educational sessions will be live—not prerecorded.

As you know, the Annual Conference is about much more than sessions. We’re also looking at how we can offer exhibits, conduct the Job Exchange, and foster networking opportunities. Even though we’re meeting October 21–24, we do have time on our side as we’ve been able to learn from other groups that have already held virtual meetings this year. The ATA Headquarters staff and vendors are looking at what worked for these other groups and what could be done better. We’ll share more about these events as they develop.

One certainty that we’ve taken from the planning process is that future conferences will include livestreamed sessions.

One certainty that we’ve taken from the planning process is that future conferences will include livestreamed sessions. This will provide greater access to the top-level educational sessions while still providing valuable networking opportunities to those who can attend in person.

We’re committed to holding in-person events once it’s safe for all. As you’re looking down the road, the Annual Conference schedule is Minneapolis in 2021, Los Angeles in 2022, Miami in 2023, Portland, Oregon in 2024, and Boston in 2025. (Boston was rescheduled as part of the negotiations to cancel this year’s onsite event.)

Registration should be online in early August. We’ll keep you posted along the way. Please plan on attending whether it’s your first conference or your twenty-first. The opportunity to share time with colleagues is certain to be welcomed by all, perhaps bringing a sense of normalcy at a time when so much is uncertain.
ATA Statement on Racism and Inequality

To our members:

The recent deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and the subsequent public expressions of solidarity and support for Black Americans and other marginalized members of society have resulted in a time of reflection for many of us.

As a professional association that brings together over 9,000 language experts of diverse backgrounds, many of whom work directly with underprivileged people, the American Translators Association stands in solidarity with our members and colleagues who are Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC), as well as those in the communities they serve.

ATA strongly opposes all forms of discrimination, acts of violence, and expressions of racial hatred. We welcome and support our members and colleagues from all walks of life. As such, and as a first step in lending our collective voice of support to fight racism and inequality, the ATA Board will examine how we can best support our BIPOC members and colleagues and broaden the dialogue with underrepresented groups in our Association.

We stand with you.

June 8, 2020

ATA strongly opposes all forms of discrimination, acts of violence, and expressions of racial hatred.
July to December 2019 + Budget

ATA has done well over the past five to six years and been able to save and invest money for a rainy day. That rainy day is now here, and we’ll need to proceed cautiously to make sure that we keep the Association on solid footing.

For comparison’s sake, during this same time frame in 2018, our total revenue was a nearly identical $1.99 million, but the change in net assets only totaled $190,577, mostly because of higher costs incurred in the Certification Program as people rushed to take the exam before the price went up.

Our biggest source of revenue for the first six months of the current fiscal year (2019-2020) was ATA Membership ($966,108), down slightly from last year at that time (-1.4%). Updated figures from the Palm Springs Conference were a bright spot. We brought in $850,364, a +3.1% gain over the New Orleans Conference ($825,401), as the only source of revenue that was higher in December 2019 than in December 2018. All other revenue fell year-on-year, with Certification ($155,766) down -3.5%.

There was some positive news in terms of Total Expenses, which were down -2.5% year-on-year, to $1.76 million. The main reason was
Certification, which experienced a substantial decline (-32.5%), from $241,180 to $162,811, as fewer people took the exam than at the end of 2018. The Palm Springs Conference remained our largest program expense, at $738,535, which is roughly the same as our event in New Orleans through that date. However, this expense will continue to grow as overhead gets allocated to it.

The main increase in expenditures through December 31, 2019, came from Supporting Services, at $432,917 (+7.0%), owing primarily to a $25,752 increase in General & Administrative expenses mostly related to our new AMS software.

MAJOR PROGRAM RESULTS
Our programs’ financial results from July 1 to December 31, 2019, are presented in Figure 3 on page 9. The takeaway from the chart is the yellow section of each individual bar. The size and location of the yellow sections demonstrates how big or small the gain or loss is for each program.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE
Before we discuss finances as they pertain to ATA61 in Boston, we should look at where we are with respect to last year’s event in Palm Springs (PS). Attendance in PS was slightly better than in New Orleans (NO). We brought in $850,364 in revenue, which is about $25,000 more than in NO ($825,151). Our hope, of course, was that Boston would be even better this year, so closer to conference revenue from Washington, DC ($1,035,842). But the reality is that even in the best-case scenario, this year’s event will be another small affair. That’s not good news for our bottom line.

In my last report, I noted that the PS conference covered its direct costs, which were around $650,000, but that once we factored in our Headquarters/overhead through the end of the fiscal year, it might break even or result in a loss. It now looks clear that it will result in a loss of about $90,000 to $100,000 after all overhead has been allocated.

There is no clear path forward for a traditional ATA61 Conference in Boston. Initially, we were unable to cancel the event outright because ATA was going to incur considerable costs, starting with contractual penalties from the venue, plus the significant portion of our staff/overhead whose cost is covered by net revenue from the conference. However, thanks to efforts at ATA Headquarters, we’ve been able to negotiate an alternative, where we reschedule Boston for 2025, in exchange for release from the contract now in place, without any penalties. At the time of this writing, the Board was strongly considering this option.

From a strictly financial standpoint, our least painful option seems to be a fully virtual event. Canceling ATA61 altogether would be financially damaging to the Association, given that the conference is our second most important source of revenue. As such, taking the unprecedented step of hosting a conference online will at least enable ATA to offer continuing education to people who may not have been able to afford to spend four days in Boston this year, or who had intended on keeping their distance for the time
being. Of course, the virtual option is far from ideal. It misses out on those people who attend the conference primarily to network, meet prospective clients, catch up with friends, and enjoy time away from their workplace. But by hosting a virtual event, ATA will provide opportunities for professional development, continuing education, advanced training, division meetups, a job fair, and hopefully even some interaction with many of our traditional exhibitors.

We’re working on the details right now. The best that I can sum up, financially speaking, is that no matter what path we follow, we’ll likely be facing a loss, so the prudent thing is to minimize it as much as possible. A virtual ATA61 seems to be the right way to do so.

ASSETS, LIABILITIES, AND NET ASSETS
We’ll finish up this report by looking at ATA’s Consolidated Statement of Financial Position as of December 31, 2019. (See pages 10 and 11.)

Overall, there was a slight drop (-2.5%) in Total Assets, from $3.28 million a year ago to $3.20 million at the end of December. This small change, however, masks some larger moves among assets that mostly offset one another.

For instance, we saw a drop (-16.3%) in Total Current Assets, which fell from $2.16 million to $1.81 million, as part of moving some cash into investments. As a result, the drop was offset by increases (+32.8%) to Investments, which rose from $1.00 million to $1.33 million, year-on-year. This figure, of course, is well before the current economic crisis.

At the same time, Total Liabilities continued to decline (-11.2%) from $1.58 million to $1.41 million. In ATA’s case, our Deferred Accounts line item represents membership services we owe to people who have joined the Association. So, when our Deferred Accounts are shrinking, we can interpret that to mean fewer members. As of December 2017, Deferred Accounts were down (-26.1%) to $1.10 million, from $1.49 million in 2018.

Given that both Total Assets and Total Liabilities shrunk by a similar dollar amount, ATA’s Net Assets (i.e., the difference between the two) declined only slightly (-2.5%) to $3.20 million, as of December 31, 2019, compared to $3.28 million a year before.
LOOKING AHEAD: COVID-19, ECONOMIC CRISIS, AND BUDGET

The figures reported above are from December 2019. Obviously, a lot has changed since then. However, they provide useful information on our starting position as this crisis unfolded.

At this point (April 2020), as a result of prudent management, ATA has savings and investments in excess of $2 million, with $1.1 million of that in cash, so it’s protected against the fluctuations of a highly volatile stock market. This is an enviable position. It means we have a financial cushion for the next six months as we determine how this crisis impacts our industry and ATA in particular.

We’ve also explored some Small Business Administration (SBA) economic relief options in case things continue in the wrong direction as a result of the economic lockdown. However, we haven’t submitted a formal application as of this writing.

Two trends that preceded the current crisis are expected to be exacerbated by it: declining membership and dwindling/negative net income from the conference. We’ll continue to

### Preliminary Consolidated Statement of Financial Position as of December 31, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSETS</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>YOY Change</th>
<th>YOY Change %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cash and Cash Equivalents</strong></td>
<td>$1,705,899</td>
<td>$2,000,855</td>
<td>($294,956)</td>
<td>-14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accounts Receivable</strong></td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>-100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prepaid Expenses</strong></td>
<td>68,675</td>
<td>142,393</td>
<td>($73,718)</td>
<td>-51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Current Assets</strong></td>
<td>1,809,574</td>
<td>2,163,248</td>
<td>(353,674)</td>
<td>-16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INVESTMENTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual Funds:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>613,944</td>
<td>486,005</td>
<td>127,939</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed Income</td>
<td>714,152</td>
<td>514,435</td>
<td>199,717</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Investments</strong></td>
<td>1,328,095</td>
<td>1,000,440</td>
<td>327,655</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROPERTY AND EQUIPMENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property and Equipment</td>
<td>562,242</td>
<td>590,626</td>
<td>(28,383)</td>
<td>-4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less accumulated depreciation</td>
<td>(509,744)</td>
<td>(482,565)</td>
<td>(27,179)</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net property and equipment</strong></td>
<td>52,499</td>
<td>108,061</td>
<td>(55,562)</td>
<td>-51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OTHER ASSETS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposits</td>
<td>13,016</td>
<td>13,016</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL ASSETS</strong></td>
<td>$3,203,184</td>
<td>$3,284,764</td>
<td>($81,581)</td>
<td>-2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CURRENT LIABILITIES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term Payables</td>
<td>230,125</td>
<td>1,332</td>
<td>228,793</td>
<td>1717.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deferred Accounts</td>
<td>1,104,793</td>
<td>1,494,251</td>
<td>(389,458)</td>
<td>-26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Current Liabilities</strong></td>
<td>1,334,918</td>
<td>1,495,583</td>
<td>(160,665)</td>
<td>-10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFERRED RENT - NONCURRENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total NonCurrent Liabilities</td>
<td>72,626</td>
<td>89,360</td>
<td>(16,734)</td>
<td>-18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Liabilities</strong></td>
<td>1,407,543</td>
<td>1,584,943</td>
<td>(177,400)</td>
<td>-11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMITMENTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NET ASSETS - UNRESTRICTED</strong></td>
<td>1,795,641</td>
<td>1,699,821</td>
<td>95,820</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</strong></td>
<td>$3,203,184</td>
<td>$3,284,764</td>
<td>($81,580)</td>
<td>-2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
monitor membership numbers. For now, we’re planning for at least a 5% drop year-on-year. The conference, for its part, as discussed earlier, will entail a loss.

We’re working hard on the budget, starting with three scenarios for revenue: best case, worst case, and most likely. Our best case is maintaining the status quo, with slight declines in revenue across the board and a manageable loss overall. The worst case involves a major drop in membership revenue coupled with canceling the conference outright, which now looks unlikely. In that situation, we would incur the largest one-year loss in ATA history. That leaves us with what we think will be the most likely outcome—somewhere in between.

In all three cases, ATA will face losses. Our most-likely scenario forecasts a negative change in net assets on the order of $400,000 for the upcoming fiscal year (2020-21). That would come on the heels of what’s shaping up to be a $300,000 loss this fiscal year (ending in June 2020). As such, many of the theoretical conversations that we’ve had in recent years about ways to streamline the Association, reduce overhead, and lower our expenses will need to become practical implementations. The decisions we make in the next three to six months will be crucial to ensuring ATA’s continued financial success.

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John Milan, CT is the treasurer of ATA and chair of ATA’s Finance and Audit Committee and ATA’s Strategy Committee. He is also an ATA-certified Portuguese>English translator. He is an economist, writer, and lecturer on the business and economics of language services. He was an adjunct professor of economics in São Paulo, Brazil, for 10 years. He has been involved in the Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters (an ATA chapter) since 2005, spending eight years on its board of directors, serving as president from 2013–2016. He has an MS in applied microeconomics from Ohio State University and degrees in international political economy and Spanish from Indiana University.

Contact: john@milanlanguageservices.com.
ATA engaged Knapp & Associates International in April 2020 to prepare an opinion on whether its history of requiring membership as a condition of eligibility for certification is consistent with current practices and quality standards for professional certification programs. The following provides an overview of fundamental concepts related to this topic, followed by our impressions of the membership requirement.

OVERVIEW OF PERTINENT CONCEPTS

General Guidelines for Eligibility Criteria
Eligibility requirements are as critical to the credentialing process as the examination itself. The eligibility requirements and examination comprise a credentialing system. Eligibility criteria should:

- Be consistent with the scope and level of practice (e.g., entry-level, advanced) targeted by the credential.
- Be directly linked to the ability to competently perform the responsibilities of the role targeted by the credential (i.e., essential to acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills).
- Not be used to limit the number of applicants or to exclude qualified candidates.
- Be reasonable and minimally stringent.
- Be balanced—the criteria should not exclude qualified individuals, nor should they be such that unqualified individuals can earn the credential simply by passing the exam.

There should be a documented rationale for each requirement.

It is advisable to permit multiple routes to achieving eligibility, wherever appropriate (e.g., additional years of work experience accepted in lieu of an academic degree).

Quality Standards for Professional Certification Programs
Standards within the certification industry set the baseline for what is expected of a quality certification program that is fair, psychometrically sound, and legally defensible. These standards are also the basis for the accreditation of professional certification programs.

In “Standard 7: Program Policies” of the Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs, published in 2016 by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), one of the Essential Elements states: “The certification program must not unreasonably limit access to certification.”

Additionally, there are the following references to eligibility requirements in the glossary of the NCCA Standards:

- Bias: Regardless of context (see below) and lack of intent, bias is to be avoided. In the context of eligibility and recertification requirements, avoid inappropriateness or irrelevance of requirements for certification or recertification if they are not reasonable prerequisites for competence in a profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area. (See Fairness above.)

- Eligibility Requirements: Published criteria, often benchmarks for education, training, and experience, with which applicants must demonstrate compliance to qualify for certification.

- Fairness: The principle that all applicants and candidates will be treated in an equitable and consistent manner throughout the entire certification process. (See Bias above.)

Certification Law
In the chapter on certification law in Certification: The ICE Handbook, credentialing law experts Jerald Jacobs, Julia Judish, and Dawn Crowell Murphy explain that requiring association membership could constitute an illegal tying arrangement in violation of antitrust laws.
Whatever the reasons for tying membership and certification, caution is warranted here. A substantial body of antitrust law stands for the proposition that tying an undesired service or product to a desired service or product can be anticompetitive and illegal. [Discussion of lawsuits involving certification programs.] The bottom line is that for now, no court is known to have ruled definitively on tying membership to certification, but it may be unacceptably risky to do so given these two prominent settlements in cases involving the issue.²

Practical Implications of Excluding Non-Members from Eligibility

Limitation of Program Volumes: Excluding otherwise qualified individuals from certification reduces program volumes and constricts the maximum market share the association can expect to capture. Given that in general, certification programs typically capture only a small percentage of the market (unless the credential is required by regulation or the majority of employers), requiring membership further hinders the penetration of the credential. Naturally, this has a direct impact on program revenue and lowers the return on investment.

Limitation of Return on Mission: The more qualified individuals who are certified, the greater the visibility and credibility of the credential and the greater the protection of the public. Thus, limiting the number of qualified individuals who are certified lowers the potential return on mission.

Impact on Stakeholder Perceptions: It’s not uncommon for professionals to view the tying of membership to certification as “a money grab.” This engenders negative perceptions of the sponsoring organization and may diminish customer loyalty.

IMPRESSIONS OF MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENT

The preceding Overview of Pertinent Concepts above presents general principles, practices, and standards pertaining to setting eligibility criteria. Arguably, the most important consideration when evaluating whether ATA’s membership requirement for certification conforms to accepted practices and quality standards is:

Is there a direct and exclusive relationship between membership in ATA and acquisition of knowledge and skills required to competently perform the role of the translator or interpreter? That is, must one be a member to become (or be) a competent professional? Is membership the sole avenue to professional competence?

This consideration encapsulates the focus of the practices, standards, and certification law recommendations highlighted in the Overview section above. Our analysis is summarized below.

Certainly, it can be said that ATA offers professional development programs and resources that facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are requisite to competent performance as a professional translator. However, this does not mean that there is a direct and exclusive relationship between ATA membership and professional competence.

1. It’s rare that the offerings of a professional association are the sole means of acquiring the professional knowledge and skills required for certification and competent performance. Often, these offerings are not even the primary or most impactful source because individuals gain pertinent knowledge and skills in myriad ways, including through academic programs, formal continuing education, self-directed learning, internships and apprenticeships, mentoring, and work experience in the field. There is no evidence that ATA membership is the only means of developing the capabilities associated with professional competence.

2. Professionals do not need to be ATA members to access the professional development offered by ATA. So, even if ATA were the only provider of professional development, it could not be said that membership was necessary for, or integral to, competence.

3. Although not a requirement for certification, ATA certification and the examinations and scoring processes are designed with the assumption that work experience in the field is necessary to having the requisite scope and depth of knowledge and skills. The section on ATA’s website entitled, “A Guide to the ATA Certification Program,” states that: “ATA certification is a mid-career credential for experienced, professional translators or interpreters.”³ Thus, ATA’s professional development programs, in and of themselves, are not sufficient to master the knowledge and skills required.

If ATA membership is not requisite to attaining the level of competence targeted by ATA certification, then it would seem that requiring membership as a condition for eligibility is potentially excluding qualified individuals from becoming certified.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above assumptions and analysis, it appears that the policy of requiring ATA membership is contrary to, and inconsistent with, current, accepted practice and quality standards pertaining to professional certification programs.

NOTES


Lenora G. Knapp is the president of Knapp & Associates International, Inc., a credentialing consultancy that has served more than 180 organizations over the past 25 years. She co-authored the second edition of The Business of Certification, a best-selling publication recognized by the American Society of Association Executives as one of “Six Books You and Your Association Need.” She also authored the “Future Trends in Certification” chapter in the last two editions of the credentialing industry’s seminal reference, Certification: The ICE Handbook. She is a recipient of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence’s Industry Leadership Award for innovation in the field of professional credentialing.
Discussion on Opening ATA’s Exam to Nonmembers

The November/December issue included an announcement that the Board had voted to postpone a decision to open ATA’s certification exam to nonmembers. This was followed by the answers to some frequently asked questions concerning the issues involved (http://bit.ly/FAQ-Decoupling). Here is another response we received after members were encouraged to submit their feedback. But don’t let the conversation stop here! As an ATA member, your voice is important, so please send us your comments.

Decoupling: A Solution in Search of a Problem

By Mike Magee, CT
ATA-certified (German>English)
Austin, Texas

ATA voting members will face an important decision on the October 2020 ballot: should members retain the right to take certification exams, or should this right be downgraded to a membership benefit? The amendment proposed by ATA’s Board would permanently change the nature of the certified translator (CT) credential and the requirements for sitting for the certification exam, opening both to nonmembers (“decoupling”). I believe this proposed amendment is not in the best interests of ATA or its members, and I urge a “No” vote.

The relevant portion of the proposed Bylaws amendment of Article III, Section 3 reads:

a. Active members have the right to attend any of the Association’s membership meetings, use all of its membership facilities, and receive all of its regular publications free or at special membership rates. They also have the right to take certification examinations, to vote, to hold Association office, and to serve on the Board of Directors and all committees of the Association. They also have the privilege of free or reduced rates for use of the Association’s membership resources, including professional development events, certification examinations, and all of its regular publications.¹

Passage of this amendment would clear the way for decoupling ATA certification from membership in the future, provided that the established financial and logistical preconditions are met.²

ATA CERTIFICATION: A LONGSTANDING MEMBER RIGHT

The first ATA certification exams (known as “ATA accreditation” until January 1, 2004) were given in the early 1970s. From that time onward, the right to earn ATA’s credential has figured prominently in the Bylaws, in the same sentence as the right to vote and serve as an elected officeholder. For decades, the credential was so central that it was the primary route to earning ATA voting rights.

The CT credential is a primary contributor to the ongoing health and vitality of ATA, as evidenced by a certified member retention rate of 95%, while the retention rate for noncertified members is approximately 75%.³ Professional standards are inextricably linked to a continuing commitment to professional education and development, and a membership requirement affirms this commitment beyond meeting the minimum continuing education requirements.

¹ "Professional development events" should probably be clarified to exclude members from professional development events that are specifically for nonmembers.
² The proposed amendment would allow for the decoupling of certification from membership in the future, but only if certain financial and logistical preconditions are met.
³ The retention rate for noncertified members is an estimate, based on partial data.
ATA IS A MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATION, NOT A CERTIFYING BODY

Per Article II, a. of ATA’s Bylaws⁴, the Association’s purpose is to promote recognition of the translation and interpreting professions and provide professional and educational opportunities and cooperation. Some professionals, including interpreters in a number of states, hold certifications issued by independent credentialing entities. Although certification consultant Michael Hamm, in his May 2000 report, recommended such a structure for ATA certification⁵, this option has not been under consideration. ATA is not primarily a certifying body, but rather a professional educational membership organization, and that is what it should remain.

STATUTORY OF ATA’S CERTIFICATION CREDENTIAL

ATA has repeatedly stated that opening certification to nonmembers would “enhance the stature” of the CT credential. Decoupling is in no way a proven path to greater recognition.

These changes would actually decrease the stature of the CT credential in the eyes of many clients and members. A certification consultant may propose various routes to “enhanced stature,” but what matters to clients and vested stakeholders is that certified individuals are committed to high standards of professional practice as evidenced by the rigors of the exam, continuing education requirements, and adherence to a professional code of ethics.

Current ethics enforcement efforts are problematic at best, and they would only become more difficult if nonmembers took the exam. Current sanctions include suspension of ATA membership, which obviously could not apply to nonmembers who misrepresent their certified status, making any enforcement effectively impossible among offending translators in the U.S. or any other country. This would result in disparate imposition of sanctions and enforcement, and would clearly contribute to a decoupled ATA credential being viewed as less prestigious.

Lastly, comparisons between American Medical Association or American Bar Association licensing and ATA certification are invalid. Physicians and attorneys in the U.S. are licensed by governing bodies in each state, while ATA certification is a voluntary credential offered to translators worldwide. The establishment of a license-type credential governed by a separate credentialing entity is a massive undertaking that would require changes to laws nationwide and is far beyond the current reach of ATA.

DOES ATA CONTROL THE SUPPLY OF CERTIFIED TRANSLATORS?

ATA leadership has asserted that nonmember access to certification would dispel any perception that “a certifying association may be controlling the supply of certified individuals.”⁶ In fact, the potential for such a perception is practically nil. With approximately 2,100 ATA-certified individuals, holders of the CT credential represent about 3.8% of the estimated 55,000 practicing translators in the United States. Among hundreds of thousands of translators worldwide, this percentage is even more negligible in the global context.

ATA’s membership requirement does not stand alone—the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) has a number of certified individuals similar to the number holding ATA certification, and they are required to maintain membership and complete continuing education credits to maintain the credential, which is referred to as being a “Qualified Member” of ITI.

CONCLUSION

ATA certification and membership together represent a significant commitment on the part of certified translators to uphold high professional standards. Attaining ATA certification was a significant factor in my joining 28 years ago, and continues to be an important reason for maintaining my membership. Its exclusivity to membership represents the gold standard for our profession, not a shortcoming that needs to be remedied. While I wholeheartedly support ATA’s goals that concretely enhance the quality and stature of the existing Certification Program, I believe that the current proposal to decouple the certification credential from ATA membership is ill-advised and unlikely to achieve those goals.

Therefore, I will vote “No” on the proposed Bylaws amendment, and I encourage other voting members to do the same.

NOTES

3. Communication from ATA Headquarters and calculation based on those figures.
New Twists on Old Scams: Language Professionals Beware!

The old adage still holds: if it sounds too good to be true, it most certainly is.

With more and more people working from home, many online scammers have upped their game. This article is the third in a series of contributions to The ATA Chronicle. I encourage you to refer to these older articles as well because the current scams are not new. Some scammers are finding new target audiences because a lot of people are working from home who have not worked from home before. For example, interpreters who used to be onsite are now working remotely, and thus have become a new target audience for online scams. Some scammers are adding new twists to old scams. For example, identity theft, previously facilitated via old-fashioned CV theft, is now accomplished via “job interviews” through video chat services. Whatever the case, the old adage still holds: if it sounds too good to be true, it most certainly is.

How can you tell if an inquiry is a scam?

If somebody you don’t know wants to pay three times your usual rate without haggling, and it’s not a super-urgent, very specialized project they need immediately (rush or premium rate!), it’s too good to be true. You should know what your time and expertise is worth and charge accordingly. If somebody offers you well above the going market price for an average project, something smells fishy.

Are you being recruited for a “job offer” by an unknown person who offers full-time or part-time employment on a W-2 basis?

Unless it’s for a very specialized job that’s urgently needed, such as specialized medical interpreters during a pandemic, it’s a scam. It’s possible that a client cold emails you to request a quote for a project after they perused a listing site such as ATA’s directory. However, being cold recruited for part-time or full-time employment by an unknown entity is unheard of. This just doesn’t happen.

It’s very easy to set up fake profiles on social media and claim to be an employee of another company.

Are you being invited to a “job interview” on Google Hangouts, Skype, or another free video platform?

As mentioned above, such “job interviews” are most likely scams. The scammers try to extract personally identifying information via these interviews for the purposes of identity theft. While some reputable businesses use video interviews for hiring and contracting purposes, they almost always use a more secure (paid) platform. Do not, under any circumstances, give out your Social Security number. See my earlier article in The ATA Chronicle, “Translation Scams Reloaded,” listed at the end of this article for information on using an Employee Identification Number instead of a Social Security number.

If you receive an email, does the “from” address match the “reply-to” address in terms of the domain (URL), and is the URL a reputable known URL?

If the “reply-to” address is a free Gmail, Hotmail, or other free email address, it’s a scam. It’s very easy to spoof an arbitrary “from” email address. If the “reply-to” address contains the same domain (the portion after the @ sign including the .com, .de, .us, etc.) but a different local part (the portion in front of the @ sign), it may just be directly routed to a person working from home. For example, if the email says it’s from hr@corp.com, but the “reply-to” reads John.Doe@corp.com, it’s probably legit, unless the corp.com server has been hacked. If the “reply-to” address is completely unrelated to the alleged sending address, it’s very likely that you’re dealing with a scam.
Scammers also sometimes set up new URL domains for scamming purposes. Sometimes they impersonate existing reputable companies with a slightly altered or misspelled domain name (.net instead of .com). If you receive one of these emails, search for the company you’re allegedly dealing with in your favorite search engine and compare the URL details that appear with the address of the email you received. If it’s a smaller company, you may even find the sender’s name in the company directory. Compare the contact details in the email with the contact details on the website. When in doubt, reply through the contact details listed on the website.

Sometimes some very industrious scammers set up new shell corporations that don’t actually exist. These shell companies tend to be relatively new and disappear as fast as they appear. To check a URL, how long it has been registered, and where, go to https://lookup.icann.org and type in the URL. Thanks to data privacy laws, you won’t see the actual registrar information anymore, but the results will tell you how long the URL has been registered. If the URL is relatively new, while that’s not an indicator of a scam in and of itself, it’s cause for caution. Look for contact details, phone numbers, and addresses on the website. Search for the address and the phone number in your favorite search engine. If the satellite picture of the address shows acres of farmland filled with cows, goats, and ostriches, but no buildings where the alleged company’s headquarters should be, then it’s a scam. (Again, see my article “Translation Scams Reloaded” for information on how to decode more information in email headers.)

Did you receive a phone call? Does the phone number match the phone number given on the company website?

Ask the caller if you can call them back at the number given on their website. If they say no without giving a good reason, it’s a scam. As mentioned above, it’s very easy to spoof/imitate/impersonate an arbitrary “from” email address. It’s equally easy to spoof a phone number. I once received a call from my own phone number. (I know I didn’t call myself, and the dog has yet to get past my phone’s fingerprint authorization.) Always hang up, verify the phone number on the company website, and call back. Or email back.

Some companies may not have a proper forwarding between business and personal phones in place, but nearly everybody has access to their business email at home.

While the packaging of these scams may change, the underlying strategies to cheat you out of your money and/or time remain the same.

Does the person refer to their social media profile as verification?

Check whether that profile and the given contact information matches the contact information on the company website you already verified (see above). If it doesn’t match, it’s a scam.

It’s very easy to set up fake profiles on social media and claim to be an employee of another company. Social media providers eventually remove these fake profiles. Unfortunately, due to the sheer number of fake accounts being set up by bots and people for a multitude of nefarious reasons, the removal takes a while. In the meantime, scammers enjoy plenty of time to wreak havoc.

EPILOGUE

I expect this won’t be the last word on scams, which are always evolving. However, you can prevent falling victim to these scams by being vigilant, doing research on potential clients, and never divulging personally identifiable information to strangers. While the packaging of these scams may change, the underlying strategies to cheat you out of your money and/or time remain the same. For further information on the aforementioned strategies, I again refer you to my two earlier contributions to The ATA Chronicle. I also encourage you to join ATA’s Business Practices discussion forum³, where the search function reveals detailed information on a variety of specific existing scams. Stay safe! ☑

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Five Strategies for Adapting to Uncertainty

Despite the curveball this pandemic has thrown at world economies, unemployment figures, family life, and more, freelance translators and interpreters have both the soft and hard skills necessary to rally in the face of challenges.

As freelancers, we’re well-equipped to adapt to changing environments. Despite the curveball this pandemic has thrown at world economies, unemployment figures, family life, and more, freelance translators and interpreters have both the soft and hard skills necessary to rally in the face of challenges. As professionals, it’s evident that we’re necessary in a world that’s more connected than ever before. And as bilinguals, our brains are trained to code-switch and multitask on a daily basis; we’re versatile, resilient, and innovative for a living. So, how do we take these traits and apply them in times when freelance work feels like a gamble and economies are still searching for solid footing?

It’s important to remember that some things are beyond our control, the present situation being a daily reminder of this inevitable fact of life. And yet, in a sense, freelancers have learned this lesson already: we don’t get to write our own source texts, and as hard as we try to educate clients, they continue to bungle terminology or use phrases that are tricky to interpret.

We’re paradoxically both in control and dependent on others when it comes to our professional lives. So, confronted with the challenge of uncertain times, how can we face declines in our work or sudden changes in expectations without allowing these circumstances to dictate our attitudes, schedules, or worse yet, quality?

1 RELAX

Has worrying ever cultivated a new client or produced a paid project out of thin air? I doubt it. Don’t let anxiety get the best of you. Try to think clearly and reasonably about your situation and consider solutions to the problems you may be facing. Writing down your concerns and brainstorming solutions on paper may help.

We tend to make poor decisions when we’re stressed; “rash” should never describe your method of decision-making. Think out the consequences of the choices you make during this time and consider whether you’re making them out of fear, aversion to risk, or forethought and wisdom. If feasible, I try to wait on making major decisions or responding to important emails for at least a day to clear my mind and make sure I’ve thought through what I’m doing or saying.

Slow times can also present positive opportunities. If you aren’t accustomed to awarding yourself an hour-long lunch break, take advantage of the extra time in your schedule to take a walk, stretch your legs, or spend more time with your kids in the middle of the day.
**COMMUNICATE AND CONNECT**

During times of uncertainty we rely even more heavily on our networks. Take time to reach out to colleagues and acquaintances you don’t usually contact when things are busy. Touching base with others will help you understand how your scenario fits into the overall situation the profession is facing. Are you an anomaly, or is everyone experiencing the same drought or stop-and-go of work? Use the communication tools to which you’re accustomed but be willing to branch out. Email is a mainstay of professional communications, but now may be a good time to become more active on Twitter or LinkedIn as a way to keep your finger on the pulse of the industry and get real-time updates as to how situations are progressing. Tapping into the hive mind can usher in some great solutions, especially in times of challenge like the one we’re in now!

One of my favorite benefits of being part of a translator collective is fellowship. If you’ve thought about teaming up with a group of translators to offer mutual support and togetherness but haven’t done so yet, what better time than now? Begin reaching out to professionals you feel comfortable with and discuss the possibility of sharing a Slack group, for example, to keep in touch throughout the workday and share your respective queries, challenges, and insights with one another.

Another way to connect is through volunteering. Now is a great time to touch base with local teachers to discuss giving a webinar or creating a video for students to learn about what we do as translators and interpreters.

**LEARN AND INNOVATE**

Heaven forbid anything like the global pandemic and economic downturn we’re living in today should happen again, but we would be remiss not to take some lessons learned from this experience. The first item I would put on my list is that nothing in life is guaranteed. What actions must you take to secure your business against an insecure world? Maybe you’re inspired to put a bit more cash into your business savings account each month, or diversify your client base a little more broadly, or diversify into a new specialization.

You can also see downtime as an opportunity to improve and better yourself. Free webinars, online conference opportunities, and podcasts abound during this time, and in-person events are turning to virtual ones that are now easy to attend without spending a dime on travel. Can you leverage these opportunities to put a new continuing education achievement on your résumé or learn from the expertise of others who are willingly sharing their knowledge and experiences during this time?

Conceding anything—price, quality, or turnaround time—just because your work situation has changed will make it that much harder to return to normal when the time comes.

**ORGANIZE AND BRAINSTORM**

When work is busy and projects are flowing, it’s often easy to get into the habit of jumping from one job to the next without thinking about sustainability and long-term growth. How can you leverage the recent changes in your workflow to brainstorm how your processes can be improved, and how might you begin preparing to implement those improvements now? You may want to consider changes to your file structure, file backup system, translation memory system, terminology management process, research procedures, etc.

Here’s an example. I’ve been wanting to develop a more comprehensive quality assurance process for years (for the peace of mind of both myself and my clients), but never had the time to test out different options since I was always moving from one project to the next or focused on an upcoming task to be completed. With more downtime than usual, I’m now able to dedicate additional resources and availability to each project, which means I can take the extra time to try out different quality assurance tools and see which one is most feasible. This improves both quality and efficiency in the long run. If not for the current situation, I would have struggled to prioritize this important task.

**STAND YOUR GROUND AND STAY POSITIVE**

Droughts of work can create a temptation to accept projects for which you aren’t qualified or develop poor negotiation habits, giving way to clients’ (sometimes unreasonable) requests. Don’t give in! Conceding anything—price, quality, or turnaround time—just because your work situation has changed will make it that much harder to return to normal when the time comes. When in doubt, think like a businessperson. You offer services and quality that haven’t changed, so neither should your terms and conditions.

**BALANCE REALISM AND POSITIVITY**

And finally, realism and positivity need not be mutually exclusive. Don’t let concern over lost revenue and an uncertain outlook jeopardize your ability to see opportunities, make sound business decisions, and pave the way for future growth. However your work may have been affected by the current economic upset, we can be certain that a return to “normal” is a long way off, but it will come. As a freelancer weathering unique circumstances, stop to think about how your current situation could be transformed into an opportunity for professional growth and continue seeking ways to protect your business against uncertain times.

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Going All in to Help Asylum Seekers at the U.S.-Mexico Border

As someone who has served on the ground at detention centers near the border and remotely from my home, I’m here to tell you that there’s an urgent humanitarian need for the skill sets of ATA members.

For trained translators and interpreters, there’s a special role to play at the U.S.-Mexico border, whether on the ground or remotely. The backlog of cases, recent implementation of Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), more aptly known as the “Remain in Mexico Policy”), and now with COVID-19, your time and energy are greatly needed.

I’ve served on the ground at detention centers near the border and remotely from my home in rural Illinois, lending my time as a translator, interpreter, and in other legal assistant capacities for asylum seekers at our border. Based on these experiences, I’m here to tell you that there’s an urgent humanitarian need for the skill sets of ATA members.

Though we constantly hear about asylum seekers from Central America, asylum seekers arrive from over 218 countries. For this reason, don’t assume that Spanish is the only language needed. Arabic, French, Portuguese, and many indigenous languages of Central America are also in great demand. According to the Migration Policy Institute, 21% of asylum seekers in 2017 were from China, constituting the largest group, followed by the three countries making up the Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Due to MPP, thousands of asylum seekers are living in tent cities on the Mexican side of our border. In Matamoros alone, there are at least 3,000 people in camps waiting months for their turn to appear in court. During this period, they need access to legal and health services, which often means they also need translation and interpreting services. Dozens of agencies with committed volunteers are doing their best to fill the gaps. Likewise, thousands of asylum seekers linger in detention centers on the U.S. side, oftentimes detained with their children. While hundreds of volunteer lawyers, social workers, and psychologists work to provide pro bono services to these detainees, most of them require an interpreter for interviews and a translator for documentation.

If you have the skills to perform consecutive interpreting for an extended period and the emotional fortitude to handle traumatic stories, then you’re ready and qualified to dive in.

WHAT ABOUT TITLE VI? OR THE RIGHT TO AN ATTORNEY?

Many of us have been trained to recite Title VI as a backing for language access advocacy. This section of the Civil Rights Act has been invoked to guarantee translation and interpreting services to any individual requiring them, if that service is funded by the federal government. As U.S. citizens, we also know that anyone accused of committing a crime has the right to an attorney if they cannot afford one. Neither of these rights applies to asylum seekers in detention centers on U.S. soil. They sit caught between a catch-22 of civil and criminal court. Their only
I WOULD LIKE TO HELP, BUT I DON’T THINK I’M QUALIFIED...

These were my exact sentiments only a few years ago. I’ve been teaching Spanish language, culture, and literature for the past 20 years at a small liberal arts college in Illinois. I was hired to teach specialized courses in Peninsular literature and culture, as well as introductory language classes. I had studied abroad in Spain as an undergraduate and gone back several times to live for extended periods. After receiving a PhD in literature, my focus on working toward tenure and raising a family required all my attention. However, I had occasionally dabbled in translation and interpreting. Both my own inclination toward this field and external pressure to teach career-ready skills led me to slowly place more emphasis on translation and interpreting. Eventually, I earned my certification as a medical interpreter in 2016.

Even with this experience, I still felt unprepared to do asylum work. So, when the humanitarian crisis at our border and talk of building a border wall began to be featured in daily media reports, I didn’t immediately take action other than to express armchair outrage and repost articles on social media. Part of me excused my inaction with the logic that I wasn’t a specialist in Latin America and had extremely limited exposure to Central American Spanish. Second, I felt more comfortable in the medical realm than the legal. I was afraid I would be tongue-tied for all the legal terminology I would need. Finally, I was woefully ignorant about the asylum process, and most of immigration law for that matter. Therefore, I rationalized that I really had no place getting involved.

This thinking continued until I did a little more reading and assigned some provocative texts to my students, like Francisco Cantú’s reflections on working as a U.S. Border Patrol officer, or PBS’s *Farmingville*, which provides an insightful look at the effects of immigration in small-town America. However, it wasn’t until after reading Valeria Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* that I knew there was no turning back. Luiselli provides readers with a precious window into the lives of unaccompanied children who arrive in our immigration courts through her work as an interpreter. Luiselli discusses how the interview process (“40 questions”), designed for adults, plays out for children. Question 7 is particularly hard (“Did anything bad happen to you on your way to the U.S.?”). As Luiselli reads herself for the answer, she reflects, “...all I want to do is cover my face and my ears and disappear. But I know better, or try to. I remind myself to swallow the rage, grief, and shame; remind myself to just sit still and listen closely... [for] a particular detail that can end up being key to his or her defense against deportation.”

As a bilingual U.S. citizen and experienced translator and interpreter, I began to realize I had a highly valuable skill set that could have a huge direct impact on hundreds of lives.

As a bilingual U.S. citizen and experienced translator and interpreter, I began to realize I had a highly valuable skill set that could have a huge direct impact on hundreds of lives. Moreover, I began to see donating my time and skills as a moral imperative. As it turns out, the shortfalls I saw in my experience, while not insignificant, were not as large as they loomed in my mind. I already had the most important skills to be successful and would quickly learn everything else of importance.

So, what’s required to work in this area? In the following I outline some of the most important skills for interpreters and translators in this field. For those still uncertain if this work is for you, it’s surprising how many skills you already use that overlap into this area.

INTERPRETERS WITH EMPATHY

For interpreters, the most important skill to bring to the table is listening with empathy. In many cases, the interpreter is literally the first person to hear a refugee’s story and the first to voice this story to someone in a position to help. This is both tremendous responsibility and an honor. In the words of my colleague Cindy Lepeley, who volunteered for the American Immigration Lawyers Association’s Proyecto Dilley pro bono project in Texas, working with women and children detainees: “This is sacred work.”

If you can perform consecutive interpreting for an extended period and have the emotional fortitude to deal with traumatic stories, then you’re ready and qualified to dive in. Many medical interpreters deal with traumatic situations in their work, so they already have the necessary experience and tools to handle intense experiences. When I say “emotional fortitude,” I don’t mean the ability to interpret like a robot without feeling. Hard as you may try, you’ll shed tears in this work, and some stories will haunt you.

There are excellent resources available on vicarious trauma for interpreters, and I cannot recommend them highly enough as a prerequisite to this work. Some tricks I use are deep breathing for its calming effect or pressing my pen hard into the paper when I’m taking notes. The latter allows me to release tension into the pen and paper and away from my lungs, throat, and chest. When possible, I try to go outside and take a walk right after interpreting traumatic material. Knowing my emotional triggers also helps. In my case, they happen to be when men break down and sob or when the client expresses profuse...
appreciation for my help. Each person will need to find the techniques that work best. Some techniques work better in person, others work better remotely. For example, pausing to collect your thoughts is visibly evident when interpreting in person, but over the phone without video, those on the other end will begin to wonder if the connection has been lost. In these situations, I find that gently clearing my throat works better.

There are many opportunities to serve as a pro bono interpreter, near or far, with or without video, through your cell phone, or on WhatsApp, a cross-platform messaging and voiceover online service. Every organization has a method to connect with an interpreter. Generally speaking, Zoom-like software won’t be used since your client won’t have access to more than a detention center phone line or a simple Wi-Fi connection. Especially now, during the adaptations required for COVID-19, most interpreting is done remotely. Typically, the organization will have a prearranged time and date for a three-way call that will allow you, other professionals, and the asylum seeker to have a discussion. These calls can last from one to three hours.

**WHAT ABOUT THE LEGAL ASPECT?**

As I mentioned previously, I was cautious about giving my time to this cause because I had a limited legal vocabulary. Yet, to my surprise, there was no need for an extensive legal vocabulary for this type of interpreting. To be clear, I’m not referring to court interpreting or even official asylum officer interviews, but rather all of the groundwork that happens before and after official court appearances.

For example, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and legal advocates need to speak to their clients several times before and after the Credible Fear Interview. This interview constitutes the most important moment in the asylum process. The asylum seeker will be interviewed by an asylum officer to find out whether they qualify for asylum by demonstrating that they need asylum to escape persecution or torture in their home country. Passing this interview is the first step toward gaining freedom from detention. Still, unbelievably, an asylum seeker may pass the Credible Fear Interview but not be allowed out of detention. In these cases, if the asylum seeker is lucky enough to have legal assistance, the attorney will try to get bond or humanitarian release for their client. In these cases, an interpreter will be called in to facilitate communication before the bond hearing.

Many medical interpreters deal with traumatic situations in their work, so they already have the necessary experience and tools to handle intense experiences.

During the interview process, certain words and phrases will come up repeatedly, such as persecution, targeted, court date, appeal, asylum, bond, police report, sponsor, flight risk, and detention. However, the majority of your time interpreting will be spent listening carefully to the microdetails of life events, clarifying the approximate time and the order in which things happened, as well as the responses and consequences of each event. The required vocabulary is much more somber: rape, assault, beatings, torture, threats, extorsion, gangs, and kidnapping. Skilled interviewers ask about the first, worst, and last thing that happened before an individual decided to flee their country. Difficult, probing questions are required to develop a legal strategy for filing for asylum. For example, when interviewing someone who was raped, the questioning will probably go something like this: “After the rape, did you go to the police or the doctor?” “Was there bruising, bleeding, or discharge in your pelvic area?” “What did the men say while they were raping you?”

While I would hate to discount the difficulty and sensitivity of these conversations, I would be remiss not to emphasize how wonderfully fulfilling the process can be. I’ve never felt so appreciated and respected as I have at the end of one of these sessions. Invariably, when it’s time to say goodbye, the asylum seeker expresses deep gratitude, not only for the legal services, but more importantly for the chance to tell their story to an empathetic listener. Whether or not the desired legal results are achieved, the human and humane interaction serves a therapeutic role. I don’t say this to express a personal opinion, but rather as a transmission of what asylum seekers have told me time and time again.

**TRANSLATORS ALSO WANTED**

It’s not just interpreting skills that are needed at the border. Volunteer translators are also in high demand. Each client is often armed with a stack of documentation for their case, all of which needs to be translated and certified. These documents range from national identification cards, birth certificates, school records, political party membership letters, death certificates, sworn statements, police reports, and even Facebook messages. For translators with limited experience with legal documents like birth certificates, rest assured that many of the advocate groups have a stockpile of rubrics and templates to help you through the process.

Some of this content will not take an emotional toll. Birth certificates, school reports, identification cards, and documents like these will only cause the kind of stress that comes from the irritations of formatting columns and rows. However, documents like police reports, newspaper articles, sworn statements, and doctors’ reports documenting the physical evidence of abuse, torture, and the like, sometimes paired with photographic evidence, will require steady nerves. (One of the most horrific documents I translated consisted of several testimonial accounts of human rights abuses of Nicaraguan political prisoners.) Here, those with
specialties in various medical fields will be of greater value than those with legal experience.

Translators have the privilege of taking breaks as often as needed. Take them. Moreover, volunteer organizations are sensitive to the secondary impacts of this kind of work and offer office hours for debriefing, webinars on secondary trauma, or label their translation requests with trigger warnings.

Some of the unique challenges have been translating handwritten documents, especially those with spelling errors and/or a lack of punctuation. Translators need to preserve some degree of the sense and feel of the original while making the text comprehensible to an asylum officer. Another challenge may come with the quality of the copy. For instance, sometimes the only way to receive a document is via a cell phone photo uploaded to WhatsApp. This is becoming increasingly common now due to the border closure and restrictions with COVID-19.

The workflow for translators is quite manageable. Typically, organizations send out translation requests once a week with a short description of the document, length, and turnaround time. The cohort of volunteers then reply back with what they would be willing to take on. Other groups may use a spreadsheet system in which you sign up to take on a document or set of documents. This allows volunteers to maintain total control of the quantity of work they handle in any given week. I’ve been proud to work for the following groups and applaud them for their professionalism: Respond: Crisis Translators Network; Refugee and Immigration Center for Education and Legal Services; Al Otro Lado; the Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project; and the Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights Coalition.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIRECT CLIENT SERVICES

Direct services mean working with a client directly, one-on-one, without the presence of a lawyer, social worker, or psychologist. Taking on the role of direct service provider will require some adjustment, especially for those who are trained to be unobtrusive and impartial. However, if you have the language skills to do interpreting, you also have the level of language skills needed to provide direct services. If this appeals to you, then step entirely out of your interpreter role and act as an administrative legal assistant and advocate.

This type of service might consist of tasks like interviewing a client about their past persecution and filling out a summary for a lawyer to read, often referred to as doing “intakes.” In a sense, this is an exercise in both interpreting and translating simultaneously to yourself! For example, I ask, listen, and respond in Spanish, but I summarize and type in English. (As far as I know, our profession has not created a term for this yet.) The team of lawyers will then follow up through a phone call with an interpreter on specific aspects of the client’s history. This saves time and builds capacity for legal services.

One portion of the I-589, the application for asylum, asks for the names and locations of each family member. Imagine the nightmare of interpreting the names of 10 siblings while trying to ensure that the spelling is correct. This task would be better performed as part of a direct service. Another task might involve agreeing to take a shift on a helpline. When you answer calls on a helpline, you enter the required information into a database, which is then shared with the administrative team in charge of finding legal representation. Many groups around the U.S. also have court observer programs, Greyhound bus station arrival programs, and visitation or letter writing programs to help ease the emotional toll on asylum seekers facing lengthy detention. My hat goes off to those volunteers who also commit to sponsoring an asylum seeker in their homes post-release.

A SENSE OF DUTY

When I take time to search, I learn more about the ways Americans are working for positive outcomes for asylum seekers. This knowledge helps keep me optimistic and balanced after the barrage of depressing news that fills my screen each day with respect to the legal and physical barriers being
GOING ALL IN TO HELP ASYLUM SEEKERS AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER continued

enacted against asylum seekers. For me, donating my time and expertise to collaborate with various groups in this important work is my own form of personal resistance. It also keeps me “in-the-know” in a way I can’t be through the television screen. This precious knowledge enriches my sense of duty as a U.S. citizen, not to mention enhances my teaching. In this way, I fully acknowledge I’m receiving immense personal benefits. I encourage my colleagues to consider going all in!

NOTES

WHERE TO VOLUNTEER
Contact the following organizations to find out about possible volunteer opportunities. Help make a difference!

The Advocates for Human Rights
www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org
Al Otro Lado
https://alotrolado.org/who-we-are/
Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights Coalition
www.caircoalition.org
Freedom for Immigrants
Immigrant Justice Campaign
https://immigrationjustice.us
Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project
Project Lifeline
https://projectlifeline.us
Proyecto Dilley
https://bit.ly/Proyecto-Dilley
Respond: Crisis Translators Network
www.respondcrisistranslation.org
Refugee and Immigration Center for Education and Legal Services
www.raicestexas.org

Though we constantly hear about asylum seekers from Central America, asylum seekers arrive from over 218 countries.

Robin Ragan is a professor of Spanish at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. She has a PhD in Hispanic literature from the University of Illinois-Urbana. She teaches all levels of Spanish, including translation and interpreting. Over the past year and a half, she has taken three groups of students to the U.S.-Mexico border to serve as volunteer interpreters for asylum seekers held in U.S. detention centers. She received her certification for medical interpreting in 2016. Contact: rragan@knox.edu.
Remote Simultaneous Interpreting Hubs or Platforms: What’s the Best Option?

In times of lockdown and social distancing, remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) has suddenly become the perfect solution for many, despite being still technically imperfect. Two work environments have emerged for delivery that interpreters will need to explore before they jump on the bandwagon. The following sheds light on both to encourage interpreters to reflect on this somewhat unchartered territory.

The outbreak of COVID-19 turned the world upside down across industries, forcing everyone to shift gears to avoid a full stop. The translation and interpreting industry was no exception. All at once, the schedules of interpreters around the globe became a long list of crossed-out assignments. Then a topic that many interpreters had underhyped for years suddenly became overhyped: remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI).

RSI was being used widely in many countries long before COVID-19, yet there was a solid dividing line between supporters and naysayers. The former thought that RSI was another technology-enabled solution to provide interpreting services. The latter believed it went against the fundamentals of traditional interpreting. A similar situation occurred when computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools were introduced. At first, many translators saw this technology as a threat but later discovered its benefits and harnessed them to increase their productivity, and hence their income. It was just another example of human resistance to change.

Remote simultaneous interpreting was being used widely in many countries long before COVID-19, yet there was a solid dividing line between supporters and naysayers.

RSI platforms were going through a trial period when COVID-19 broke out. Although these platforms had been around for some time, most interpreters reported technical issues when using them. However, when in-person events were wiped out in a matter of days after the pandemic hit, these platforms became the perfect solution—despite still being imperfect—and the naysayers rapidly changed their attitude.

Many clients and interpreters only associate RSI with online platforms, but RSI has a much more friendly side: RSI hub networks. In fact, RSI services can be delivered through hubs or over online platforms. The following aims to shed some light on the differences between both work environments for interpreters so they can make an informed decision to best serve their clients or to accept or decline an assignment.

HUBS AND RSI PLATFORMS: WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

The main difference between a “hub environment” and “RSI platforms” is that hubs are a “controlled environment” that replicates most of the features of a traditional interpreting setting. Although the interpreter is not there,
Remote Simultaneous Interpreting Hubs or Platforms: What’s the Best Option?

continued

they work under the same technical conditions as being onsite. By contrast, RSI platforms are like aircraft that the interpreter has to fly alone, with plenty of buttons but no automatic pilot.

Hubs and RSI platforms involve two different distance interpreting (DI) setups. The table above summarizes the main characteristics of each one.

**Hubs: Advantages/Disadvantages**

Let’s analyze hubs first. Most hubs are compliant with the International Organization for Standardization’s (ISO) standards for simultaneous interpreting (ISO 201081 and 201092). This means that they meet the technical requirements set for quality and transmission of sound and image to interpreters and from interpreters to participants, and for the configuration of the interpreter’s working environment. The interpreter works via video and audio feed remotely from the event venue.

Hubs provide three main advantages:

1. **Co-Location and Technical Support:** Simultaneous interpreting (SI) is about teamwork. In a hub environment the interpreter can rely on their boothmate as much as in an in-person setting, whether the interpreter needs to switch turns more often, needs help on a particular word or figure, experiences a technical glitch on the console, or has a coughing fit! As such, the interpreter only needs to focus on the interpreting task (a task that’s already a “multi-task”).

2. **Technical Support:** A qualified technician is in charge of all the technical aspects, securing the appropriate working conditions at all times. Usually hubs support backup systems to prevent any connectivity issues from jeopardizing the event.

   **The downside of hubs is that by being away from the event venue, interpreters miss plenty of information that they usually gather by being there.**

3. **No Relay Restrictions:** Hubs can accommodate several language combinations, so no relay restrictions exist in the case of multilingual events.

   The downside of hubs is that by being away from the event venue, interpreters miss plenty of information that they usually gather by being there. This includes not only being debriefed by speakers and meeting moderators, but also picking up information first-hand that can have an impact on the development of the event. Big conferences or face-to-face events are not just about what happens on the main stage, but also about what transpires in the exhibition rooms and break-out sessions. Coffee breaks are a good opportunity for attendees to network and for interpreters to collect additional information they can use to enhance their work in the booth when sessions resume. All that is missing in a hub environment.

**RSI Platforms: Advantages/Disadvantages**

Compared to hubs, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. RSI platforms do not fully comply with ISO interpreting requirements and are still going through a trial-and-error period. Some work better than others but none are entirely error-free yet and need further development to come close to the efficiency of traditional interpreting equipment.

These platforms are like a cake you pull out of the oven five minutes early because you’re starving. It may taste good, but it has neither the right color nor the right texture. With RSI platforms, you can tell those five minutes are missing.

The main disadvantages of RSI platforms are:

**No Co-Location:** When working through platforms, and even if two interpreters are involved, they are usually not co-located, which hinders the support process. In a booth situation, mutual assistance is an intuitive, almost automatic act. When using an RSI platform, however,
working with another interpreter becomes a hassle. Interpreters have a chat function available to communicate with their mates working remotely, but this forces them to allocate a portion of their attention to technical aspects beyond their control. This may impair their delivery process and lead to increased cognitive load and fatigue.

**Technical Support and Work Setting:**
The fact of not working in a controlled environment means interpreters also have to undertake certain technical tasks. RSI platforms provide remote technical support from a technician located somewhere in the world. But again, like a pilot, while you call the air traffic control tower for assistance you have to continue flying the aircraft. Maybe the pilot can place the airplane on autopilot for a while, but the interpreter cannot do so with a live event. So, if a technical difficulty arises (e.g., power outage, connectivity failure, poor video or audio feed, etc.), the interpreter will have to add yet another task while trying to keep on providing the service.

**In simultaneous interpreting, sound input is the interpreter’s most important source of information.**

Interpreters are also in charge of the work setup, which entails securing a soundproof setting and having the right equipment in place, which means a top-notched computer, ISO-compliant headsets with built-in microphones and noise-canceling features, preferably more than one screen, a hardwired Ethernet 15 Mbps internet connection (or better), and last but not least, a good command of the platform to be used.

**Handover and Relay Restrictions:**
Most vendors provide handover and relay functionalities. However, in reality, switching turns on these platforms is not as seamless as it should be and can create rendition gaps. Perfect coordination between the interpreters is then required to mute and unmute microphones at the exact moment. In a booth setting, this is done almost automatically since consoles turn on and off by default. The same applies to relay functions that are available on some platforms. However, these functions don’t yet work as smoothly as they should and can seriously hinder the rendition of those interpreters depending on the relay output.

**Latency:** Latency is a measurement of roundtrip time (RTT) for a packet of data, or the number of milliseconds it takes a packet to travel to a destination (server) and back again. In simultaneous interpreting, sound input is the interpreter’s most important source of information. The image of the speaker and of all visual materials used in the conference is almost as important. New technologies allowing for different forms of audio and video signals are now being used increasingly to transmit sound and images to interpreters. Their quality determines the working conditions of the interpreters.

Pursuant to ISO standards, image and sound must arrive at the interpreter’s screen and headphones within 500 milliseconds (0.5 second) of being produced at the source. On the other hand, latency between the original speech and the reception of simultaneous interpreting by the audience should not exceed 1,000 milliseconds (0.1 second). Not all platforms provide the right latency levels and sometimes deliver out-of-sync audio, which can be rather disturbing as it forces the interpreter to choose between the audio and video feed for concentration purposes.

**Acoustic Shock:** The International Telecommunication Union and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute define acoustic shock as: “Any temporary or permanent disorder of the ear or auditory nervous system caused by an abrupt and unexpected increase of the acoustic pressure in a telecommunication system.”

Unlike professional interpreter consoles, which are fitted with acoustic shock protection functions to modulate the volume whenever the input volume suddenly shoots up, interpreters using RSI platforms have no control over peak loads that can result in acoustic shock. Using headphones with noise-canceling or noise limiting functions is one way interpreters can protect their hearing. However, there’s nothing they can do about the audio feed they receive. Therefore, knowing the technical specifications of each platform before accepting an assignment is of paramount importance to protect one of the most valuable assets interpreters have—their ears.

**Some RSI platforms work better than others but none of them is entirely error-free yet and need further development to come close to the efficiency of traditional interpreting equipment.**

**WHAT ABOUT INTERPRETING USING ZOOM?**

I would like to dedicate a few words to the “new kid on the block.” Everybody knows Zoom is a meeting platform that’s being widely used for interpreting purposes mainly for cost reasons. Zoom only allows for the interpreter to be assigned the role of interpreter rather than that of host or participant, and it doesn’t support any other interpreting functions such as handover or relay features. The interpreter depends entirely on the video and audio feed provided by other participants. This can be problematic since some participants may be using a poor internet connection and introducing all kinds of artifacts into the communication such as blocking, freezing, blurring, jerkiness, and out-of-sync audio, not to mention overlapping conversations, people not muting their microphones, or using their computer microphones and
loudspeakers. All of this can result in latency issues.

In summary, RSI platforms will require further enhancements to become fully interpreter-friendly and client-effective.

SO, WHAT’S THE BEST OPTION?

Simultaneous interpreting is a complex cognitive process where the interpreter’s focus should remain solely on the communicative task. Adding technical variables means increasing the interpreter’s cognitive load, which can have a toll not only on the interpreter’s health but also on their performance.

For the time being, only hubs (not all, of course) comply with the International Association of Conference Interpreters’ DI requirements, which makes them the best option for DI, although nothing will ever replace the beauty of being onsite.

However, RSI platforms should be given a chance. They can be an excellent solution for short events lasting less than three hours and involving a small number of participants. This could encourage company teams located around the globe to meet more often and eventually increase the demand for qualified interpreters. To become fully effective, though, these platforms need to be further improved to fulfill the standards of the International Organization for Standardization and guarantee the right working conditions for interpreters. In this regard, vendors should get qualified interpreters onboard from the beginning to ensure that RSI platforms meet their expectations and don’t just take into account the vendor’s profitability or the end client’s cost savings. If we want to maintain a high level of professional service, the interpreter’s opinion matters.

Finally, RSI calls for customer education now. Interpreters must ensure that clients understand what they’re embarking upon when they want to hold a meeting or an event through a hub or over a platform. And most importantly, they must understand that an interpreter’s output is only as good as the input.

RSI is a threat and an opportunity. History shows that resisting change only places us behind those who embrace it. So, let’s consider RSI an opportunity and contribute to making it a good solution for clients and another tool for interpreters in an ever-changing world.

Never has the world come to a halt as it has recently. No doubt, these are turbulent times, but as the management consultant, educator, and author Peter Drucker said: “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday’s logic.” If we want to continue promoting the best professional standards and safeguard our industry, we must keep abreast of the new scenario, and this may require applying tomorrow’s logic to today’s new context.

NOTES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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Future Tense: Thriving Amid the Growing Tension between Language Professionals and Intelligent Systems

With accelerating technical changes in the industry, the best way forward is not to fear neural machine translation and artificial intelligence but to use a disciplined approach to reinvent yourself.

The translation and interpreting professions are thousands of years old. Throughout the ages, every major technological advance having to do with the rendering, storing, or processing of language has required a rethinking of the way language professionals conduct their work. These days, the talk is all about neural machine translation (NMT) and artificial intelligence (AI) and whether they pose an existential threat to the translation profession. The changes occurring around us present such a radical shift in the tools available for translation that it’s not merely time for us to rethink but to reinvent our industry and ourselves.

The Law of Accelerating Returns
That things are changing for translators is nothing new, but what is different is the rate of change. If it seems to you that technological advances are coming faster than ever, then you have a good sense of what's going on. In his 2001 paper “The Law of Accelerating Returns,” futurist Ray Kurzweil posited that our rate of technological advance doubles every 10 years, which can basically be explained by our ability to use the latest technological efficiencies to speed the development of the next wave of technology. Instead of arguing whether or not this is true, I’ll simply use Kurzweil’s statement as a way to explain why my head is spinning.

To make the math easy, let’s start this example in 1980, when I began my university studies. At that time, my decade-long frame of reference for the speed of technological advance was the 1970s (which brought us pocket calculators, the video game Pong, VCRs, the C programming language, the Apple II, and the Sony Walkman). If we assign a value of 1 to the rate of technical change in my reference decade and that rate doubles every 10 years, then the rate of technical advance in our current decade is 32 times faster than it was back then.

Let that sink in for a moment. According to Kurzweil’s model, the technical advances that we churn out in the 12 months of 2020 would have taken 32 years of effort back in 1970.

A curious thing about human beings is that we tend to place ourselves in the middle of everything, including exponential growth curves, which makes it challenging for us to comprehend extreme rates of change. In Figure 1 on page 30, which places 2020 in the middle of a timeline that illustrates Kurzweil’s Law of Accelerating Returns from 1950 (the decade that saw the first serious work on MT) through 2100, we’re still on a flat part of the curve, and the truly dizzyingly steep part of the curve is yet to come.

But it’s critical to remember that the growth is exponential throughout the curve. In Figure 2 on page 31, we see the identical growth curve, also beginning in 1950, but at a scale that allows you to appreciate how much the rate of technological advance has increased recently.

While NMT is already having a tremendous impact on the way many professional translators work, technological advances that bear directly on our work—including but certainly not limited to MT—will not only continue but actually accelerate and have profound effects throughout the industry. The day-to-day work of the translator of today will be hardly recognizable to a language services professional in 2030.

Why Is AI Coming After Language?
The intentional application of nuanced communication is one of the main measures we use to signify intelligence in living organisms, and we also extend that measure to manmade objects. A robotic vacuum cleaner that bumps into walls and...
then turns around and travels in a straight line until it hits the next obstacle in its path is clever, perhaps, but brutish. A smart speaker, on the other hand, which has the ability to understand spoken commands and responds in kind, is on a completely different level.

Linguistic sophistication is so integral to our understanding of intelligence that it’s hard to imagine us calling anything “intelligent” that doesn’t have the capacity—or the ability to develop the capacity—to understand and manipulate language. AI needs the ability to use language to live up to our expectations of what it should be.

THE UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED FUTURE

As cyberpunk novelist William Gibson said in an interview in The Economist in 2001, “The future is already here; it’s just not evenly distributed.” It’s one thing for technology to be developed and available, but it’s another thing altogether for it to be deployed widely and used.

In our famously fragmented industry, where, according to CSA Research, the top 10 companies make up less than 10% of the market, it’s not surprising that technology advances at markedly different rates among the various types and sizes of language services providers. From multinational language services providers with millions of dollars of revenue, to regional players, to local translation shops, to individual language professionals, we all have limited amounts of time and money to invest in technology, and we make those investments as wisely as possible to excel in our specific markets.

The fundamental questions that should be on the minds of every language services provider who intends to be gainfully employed in the future are:

- What will my customers need at that time?
- What skills and tools do I need to fulfill those needs in a manner that makes me stand out from my competition?

In other words, the pertinent question is not “Will NMT and AI systems make translators obsolete?” but instead the much more optimistic and self-directive, “What do I need to do to thrive as a language services provider in the future?” If you’re not paying close attention to technology trends, however, you won’t have an adequate answer to that question. After all, your customers’ needs and those skills and tools you need to develop don’t exist in a vacuum but in a world that’s increasingly imbued by ever more intelligent systems.

THE EVOLUTION OF INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

AI systems, both current and future, can be classified along a spectrum of how autonomously they are able to act.

Systems that do: These are machines that perform a single, albeit sometimes very complex, task that requires the acquisition and application of knowledge. This knowledge is presented to the system in the form of many examples of the starting point and end point of the task (such as a massive translation memory used as training material for an MT system). These systems can never be better than the training material and are unable to improve without human intervention.

Systems that learn: These are machines that can not only perform a task that requires the acquisition and application of knowledge, but can also iteratively improve their performance of that task without human intervention.

Systems that truly think: Also called artificial general intelligence (AGI), these are machines, still in the realm of science
fiction, that can learn to perform and recursively improve at any task, and have autonomous decision-making abilities, including, for instance, making the decision to adopt a new goal and learn new skills.

NMT and most AI products in use today fall into the first category, but there are already some nascent technologies that can improve performance autonomously, such as robots that get better at walking as they gain experience of their environment. Sceptics think that we’ll never reach true AGI, and even strong proponents of AGI predict that we’ll need decades to produce computerized systems that mimic and ultimately surpass a human being’s ability to assess performance, determine what needs to be done to improve that performance, and then take the necessary steps to do so.

If humankind ever manages to create AGI, then that invention will have the ability to improve itself. In his 2017 book _Life 3.0_, Max Tegmark presents a hierarchy of goals that futurists predict will evolve in AGI systems, regardless of what their initial primary goal is. (See Figure 3 on page 32.) These subordinate goals will allow such a system to continually improve its capacity to achieve its primary goal.

Goal assessment allows the system to determine whether the primary goal is still appropriate. In the hierarchy presented in Figure 3, goal assessment is supported by increasing the accuracy of one’s world model—or improving one’s understanding of the environment in which the primary task is being performed. As long as the world model indicates that the primary goal has not yet been achieved and remains valuable, then the system will stay on task. But if the world model shows that the primary goal has been achieved or is no longer needed, then the goal assessment functionality could shut down the system or select a new goal.

Capacity enhancement ensures that the system will be in a steady state of trying to improve its ability to achieve the overarching goal. Capacity enhancement is supported by the autonomous improvement of the system’s hardware and software, both of which are also informed by the improving world model.

With these sub-goals in place, the AGI system will become increasingly efficient at achieving its primary goal until that goal is deemed no longer necessary, and then it can move on to another goal. In other words, an AGI system will not worry about making itself redundant because it has a disciplined approach to honing skills and finding problems to apply them to.

**THE EVOLUTION OF YOU**

Technical advancement is accelerating all around us. It will have a dramatic impact not only on your work but also on the needs of your customers. And while we can get sucked into thinking that we are or will soon be competing with increasingly intelligent systems for translation work, that’s a self-defeating attitude that ignores potential new opportunities for fulfilling the changing needs for language services. After all, the fact that a $20 pocket calculator can do higher mathematics has not reduced the value of understanding mathematics for an engineer. But engineers spend much less time doing math these days than they did back in the age of the slide-rule.
FUTURE TENSE: THRIVING AMID THE GROWING TENSION BETWEEN LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS AND INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Similarly, a person with refined multilingual skills who fearlessly interacts with technology and has the ability to adapt and develop new skills will continue to be a valued asset. But you’ll spend much less time translating. Exactly what your work will look like depends on how you, as a “natural” intelligent system, respond to the business environment and technological environment in which you work.

LEARNING FROM THE INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS THAT LEARN FROM US

Success for a language services provider requires a disciplined approach to defining what the customer needs and what skills and tools are required to fulfill those needs. Why not immediately adopt the method of continual improvement that futurists predict AGI will have someday? In other words:

■ Select a goal that’s relevant to your current worldview.
■ Always assign yourself the task of improving your ability to achieve goals, both in terms of the tools you have at your disposal (your “hardware”) and your cognitive abilities (your “software”).
■ Stay curious and continually improve what you know about your world.
■ Regularly assess how well your primary goal fits into that worldview.

Stay on task until your primary goal is fulfilled or is no longer necessary.

And then reinvent yourself.

Even if you’re still in a quiet and comfortable corner of the language services industry, be aware that tumultuous technology-driven change is coming, both in terms of the way we work and what customers require of us. Agility will be increasingly critical to success. The big institutional players of recent years will likely struggle with procedural inertia. And there will be great opportunities for intrepid language professionals who work toward a virtuous cycle of thriving alongside intelligent systems in the fulfillment of their customers’ requirements.

NOTES


Jay Marciano has been involved in the development and application of machine translation (MT) for 22 years. He has held leadership positions at Lionbridge and SDL, where he was responsible for the development and application of MT. He presents widely on the future of the language services industry, and has been a central figure in building understanding among language service professionals of the power and potential of MT. Contact: jaymarciano@gmail.com.
Acoustic Shock: What Interpreters Need to Know

(The following was originally published on the blog of ATA’s Interpreters Division, www.ata-divisions.org/ID/blog.)

Acoustic shock can have very serious implications for interpreters but we’re not paying enough attention to it. This issue has gained more awareness in the context of remote interpreting during the pandemic, but also in the context of colleagues who experienced acoustic shock while working in Canada, Paris, and other places. As interpreters, we need to educate ourselves about this condition.

Let’s start with a definition. There are several definitions out there, including: exposure to sudden, loud, shocking, or startling noises, usually in one ear, which may subsequently develop into painful symptoms. Acoustic shock can have many symptoms. It could manifest as physical symptoms like headaches, tinnitus, nausea, hyperacusis (a collapsed tolerance to usual environmental sounds), muffled hearing, and vertigo. Other symptoms include numbness or burning sensations around the ear. If the symptoms persist, acoustic shock could even lead to psychological symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and even depression.

PROTECTING YOURSELF

So, what can you do to protect yourself against acoustic shock and its consequences? You could start by purchasing a limiter. Limiters are not widely used in the world of interpreting, but they are in the world of television and the music industry. These small pieces of equipment act as a middleman between your headphones and the interpreter console or computer. They inhibit any sudden surges in sound from reaching dangerous levels. The manufacturers calibrate the limiters to suit the make and model of your own headphones. You may want to check out brands like AdaptEar (www.adaptear.com) or LimitEar (www.limitear.com). You’ll also find headphones with built-in limiters. They may not offer 100% protection against acoustic shock, but they’re better than nothing. Links for more information on the brands and specifications can be found at the end of this article.

There are also interpreter consoles with built-in limiters. So, when you get back to onsite meeting assignments, make sure you know what equipment will be provided. Remember, it’s good practice to ask questions about the equipment you’ll be using in the booth. The conference technicians will be able to provide the information you need to minimize the risk of injury. After all, being knowledgeable about the tools of your trade is always a good idea.

Some colleagues who have suffered acoustic shock had to undergo lengthy medical treatments, during which they were unable to work. At the risk of stating the obvious, our hearing is essential to our livelihood as interpreters. With this in mind, you might want to look into purchasing an occupational accident insurance policy. These policies are designed to cover any periods of unemployment that may arise as a result of an occupational accident, but make sure to check if acoustic shock qualifies. Having this type of coverage in place will minimize the financial impact if you do suffer an injury.

Something else for conference interpreters to keep in mind when we do start traveling again is that certain types of planes can be very noisy. Using noise-canceling headphones when traveling can help protect your ears. It’s also a good idea to have regular hearing checkups as you may not be aware that your hearing is deteriorating.

SAFETY IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

When we do in-person interpreting, we often rely on others to ensure that the equipment functions properly. However, under the current circumstances when we’re all working from home, that responsibility falls on us. Properly functioning equipment will go a long way toward ensuring our safety and peace of mind in troubling times. ☞

NOTES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


The International Association of Conference Interpreters put together a listing of headsets that are compliant with the International Organization for Standardization: https://bit.ly/AIIC-headsets.

Maha El-Metwally is a conference interpreter who works for a wide range of international organizations, including the European Institutions and the United Nations. In addition to ATA, she is a member of the International Association of Conference Interpreters and the Chartered Institute of Linguists. She serves on the Board of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, where she is also a member of the Admissions Committee. She is associated with a number of universities in the U.K. and abroad where she contributes to the curricula. Having obtained an MA in interpreter training from the University of Geneva, she offers training on technology for interpreters and remote interpreting. Contact: maha@culturalbridges.co.uk.
Guest Column: What’s New in Subtitling Translation Tools?

A few weeks ago, I asked Damián Santilli to write an article about the current state of audiovisual translation tools for my own Tool Box Journal (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit). He did, and my readers and I were very impressed by the depth of his knowledge and his vision for a field that’s growing very rapidly. So, in a slight departure from my usual column, Damián will take over from here with a slightly modified version of his original article. Enjoy!

—Jost Zetzsche (Chair, ATA Translation and Interpreting Resources Committee)

Translation environment tools are steadily improving. The overwhelming presence of neural machine translation (NMT) in every translation suite, plus the constant improvement of technologies (e.g., upLIFT from SDL Trados Studio) are changing the way we approach translation with almost every project. In audiovisual translation (AVT), however, despite technical improvements and innovations in apps from streaming services, it sometimes feels like we subtitlers are still working in much the same way we did back in 2000.

Back then, we faced a huge leap in methodology and tool availability. We rapidly went from receiving physical materials to subtitle to logging into our clients’ servers to download media and then email back the subtitles. Although some things have changed in the past few years, professional subtitlers working for direct clients like production companies, or even film directors themselves, have been using the same resources for a while now: free software and software that’s too expensive for some freelancers. So, what have we been missing in between? Well, features like the ones found in tools technical translators use (e.g., memoQ, Wordfast, and Trados Studio)—although we also have our own options, kind of. Let’s dive into some possible software options to help us in our work and see what’s new for subtitlers. (Please refer to the sidebar for links to the tools mentioned.)

Can we still rely on free software for professional subtitlers?

The short answer is yes. If you’re the type of subtitler who prefers working mainly for direct clients instead of large streaming services via vendors who don’t always offer the best rates, then you might be in a sweet spot in the AVT world. I don’t mean this just because you get to charge higher rates. You can actually use many free software alternatives, like our old friends Subtitle Workshop and VisualSubSync, or the more frequently updated and flashy Aegisub and Subtitle Edit. They all allow you to deal with large media files in a variety of formats—yes, they’re powerful enough to do that. You don’t really need to pay if you’re also trained on spotting with these tools. (Spotting refers to determining the “in time”—the time at which the subtitle appears on-screen—and “out time”—the time at which the subtitle disappears.) However, you might be interested in investing (a lot) in more professional tools.

I have the money and want to invest in something better.

There’s no doubt that despite their elevated price, both WINCAPS Q4 Subtitling Software and EZ Titles offer great improvements with things like recognizing some of the subtitles from the audio and letting you save time on spotting and creating subtitles from DVD or Blu-ray, for instance, if that’s something you’re looking for. They also have a more powerful interface, which is something you would expect from more expensive tools. But when it comes to technical translation, for instance, can’t you do pretty much the same thing with a free, open source tool like OmegaT instead of spending the money on a more professional tool? Yes, you can. And in the case of subtitle editors, that same logic applies, although with a big difference. If you want to invest in professional software, you’ll have to pay around $1,700 for the EZ Titles basic edition and $300 a year for WINCAPS. Is it worth the investment? It certainly is if you can afford it.

What about the cloud?

Here we can find some new alternatives: some of them free and some expensive (but not outrageously so).
I’ve been particularly impressed by Ooona, which is similar in price to the most expensive alternatives but offers a wide variety of options. For instance, if you’re used to working with timed templates (where subtitles appear for a specified time), you can opt for the cheapest option, Ooona Translate, and subtitle online without having to install software. (See Figure 1.) Certainly, this is a great way to go about things nowadays, considering that most subtitlers are working with timed templates. (It’s worth noting here, though, that if you’re working for Netflix, for instance, you’ll be translating directly on their online software and won’t need anything else.)

It’s clear that going forward we need to find an alternative that, combined with speech recognition technology, allows us to create translation units without having a timed template.

Amara is another great alternative for working directly from the cloud, with two options, Plus and Pro, which are both somewhat cheaper than other paid alternatives. Additionally, Amara has a free public version that enables you to use their powerful editor, but all subtitles you create there are publicly available. This means you can’t use this software professionally, but it’s an excellent way to start for many translators wanting to take their first steps in AVT. There are other options you can find online, like Subtitle Edit Online and Subtitle Horse, but I would recommend trying either Ooona or Amara, particularly if you’re a Mac user and find it difficult to get different alternatives for your specific needs.

SUBTITLING WITH TRANSLATION MEMORIES AND TERMBASES—ARE WE THERE YET?
As I said in the introduction, if you’re like me and work as a subtitler as well as a technical translator, you might have been wondering why it’s so hard to have a subtitling environment tool with translation memories and termbases. Especially considering that two, three, or even more translators might be working at the same time on an entire season of an upcoming television show. Well, there’s a catch: you need a source text, right? While this might seem obvious to you and me, it isn’t for translation environment tool makers. Some developers—e.g., SDL with their Studio Subtitling app or memoQ with their memoQ Video Preview Tool—assumed that we would be translating from files where we could watch the video inside the translation environment tool while subtitling. But most of us don’t work like that. We work from audio, and if we do have a script, it’s formatted as plain text in a PDF or Word file.

SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
It’s clear that going forward we need to find an alternative that, combined with speech recognition technology, allows us to create translation units without having a timed template. This, together with the possibility of sharing termbases between several translators working on the same project within the same subtitling environment tool, and potentially allowing interaction between translators—as we are starting to see in some web-based tools—could drastically change the way we work. In that regard, there might be something cooking between artificial intelligence, automatic speech recognition, and NMT developer AppTek and Ooona, who appear to have joined forces (see xl8.link/AppTek-Ooona). We’ll just have to wait and see.

Damián Santilli is a sworn English<>Spanish translator and a certified international Spanish copy editor, proofreader, and training expert. His areas of expertise are subtitling, software localization, information technology, engineering, and mechanics. In 2018, he was part of the team that created Netflix’s Hermes test and was in charge of the Latin-American version of the exam. Contact: drsantilli@gmail.com.

Jost Zetzsche is chair of ATA’s Translation and Interpreting Resources Committee. He is the author of Translation Matters, a collection of 81 essays about translators and translation technology. Contact: jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com.
How Interpreters Are Making the Switch to Remote Interpreting in a COVID World

Probably the most momentous change for interpreters during the COVID-19 crisis is the universal switch to remote interpreting during the lockdown—a transition that feels threatening to some. So, I asked on Twitter whether some interpreters could share their remote interpreting experiences with us. Here are the very diverse answers I received from interpreters around the world.

LORENA ORTIZ SCHNEIDER
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I did a session on FaceTime. The patient I was interpreting for was wearing personal protective equipment in the lobby of a clinic. I was at my home office with a new USB-wired headset with noise-canceling microphone and flex arm. The provider was also in the lobby, but I never saw him (maybe he was holding the phone up for the patient). The receptionist was talking in the background, which was a little distracting. It was actually not a bad session. I had to ask the patient to repeat and speak closer to the phone a few times, but overall I would give the experience an 8 on a scale of 1-10.

I did another session similar to this from my home office. The patient (wearing a facemask) was in a room at the doctor’s office. The doctor was in another room in the same office without a mask. The patient was upset that she couldn’t be in the same room with the doctor.

I also did a Zoom appointment, also for a medical clinic, but this time the doctor, patient, and I were all in separate places. It was a little challenging to get the doctor to look at the patient as she spoke and pointed to her body to show where she was experiencing pain and inflammation, but I made sure he looked up when I interpreted with the same gestures the patient used. This session was seamless.

At another session, a physical therapist used a platform called thera-LINK (www.thera-link.com), which worked pretty well for me but not for the patient. She was unable to connect. The therapist and I could see and hear each other on thera-LINK, but the therapist had to dial up the patient on the WhatsApp video app. The therapist would hold up her iPhone to the screen so I could see the patient as she was talking. Nevertheless, both the audio and video were sub-par, especially for a physical therapy session where seeing people explain exercises is important, but we got through it.

Another platform I’ve used is call Doxyme (www.doxyme.me), which is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. However, there are latency issues on the platform itself, so we’ve actually ended Doxyme sessions midstream and resorted to Facebook Messenger video to complete the session. This latter platform works surprisingly well. It requires you to have a Facebook account on which you feel comfortable having the provider and limited-English-proficient individual “friend” you. (If you don’t want to use your personal Facebook account to do this, set up a dummy account.)

Zoom has also worked well with law firms communicating with their clients and having them sign documents via DocuSign.

LUCÍA HERNÁNDEZ
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When I first started hearing about events being canceled due to the coronavirus, I said a little prayer that my favorite clients (film festivals) wouldn’t cancel. I’m sure you know how that turned out.

Having lost the ability to see movies in theaters, I grieved. Then I got in touch with my clients. They were also grieving, but they still had to do good by their programs. Filmmakers were depending on them to connect with audiences and distributors. Their stories still needed to be told.

And so, while my clients worked out how they would engage with viewers and promote deal-making from home, I tried out every video conferencing, webinar, and remote interpreting platform I could to determine how to recreate an in-person encounter from home. This is not an easy feat.

I took to Twitter and found fellow interpreters doing the same. Novel solutions and issues are being discovered constantly, so I’m arming myself with knowledge and alert to hiccups. To mitigate the usual issues related to sound quality, having a clear view of the speaker and visual aids, and knowledge of the equipment, I invested in better headphones and a microphone, upgraded internet and cables, soundproofed my space as well as I could, and tested repeatedly. The added visual element required furniture rearrangement, new lighting, a camera, and an additional monitor. There’s nothing like interpreting in person, but these conditions have dramatically improved my ability to interpret effectively from home.

When the time came, my clients were relieved to have one fewer thing to think about. No solution is perfect, and I’m learning something new every day. My clients still need help, but there’s no time like a crisis to go from vendor to partner.

Cyril Belange
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I’m a consultant conference interpreter based in Nice, France. When the COVID-19 crisis hit, I was already using some smart solutions for interpreting. I had been a project manager for the Linguali startup for two years, setting up bring-your-own-device solutions for simultaneous interpreting assignments onsite. It allowed users to listen to the interpreters through their smartphones and earpieces. I learned how to explain to clients how to use the web app, how to set up my soft console and acquire the audio.
feed from the floor, and how to run the system and supervise my teams. Consequently, during the lockdown, I quickly turned to remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) platforms, which all have a lot in common. I tried out 10 of them and made my choice based on streaming quality and stability, confidentiality, and user experience design for both interpreters and users. I can now provide remote interpreting from my home studio or from a hub located in Nice.

Clients and users still rely on the true expertise of professional interpreters that’s required to make international events a success. Let’s not forget that platforms, hubs, and web apps are just tools exactly like portable interpreting equipment and booths. No more no less.

**GIO LESTER**

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I started the transition to remote interpreting in 2017. It was the first time I was trained on a platform. I’ve also participated in training for other interpreters, demonstrations for potential clients, and actual interpreting on a volunteer basis (training for me). It was exciting!

Since then, I’ve become familiar with other platforms. This month I had my first job assignments: an arbitration, an interview, and the most recent was a conference with attendees from all over Latin America and speakers from the U.S. and Latin America. I had no issues other than a pain in my outer ear from the headphones. The padding on the earpieces was not enough to prevent the discomfort. Other than that, interpreting remotely has been a piece of cake!

**GABRIELLA SUZANNE VANZAN**

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Italian conference interpreters have been severely impacted by the coronavirus crisis due to our government’s ban on all conventions. In addition to citizens not being allowed to leave their homes (except out of necessity), here in Italy many so-called nonessential activities had to stop during the lockdown, leading to a sharp economic setback.

Before the crisis, the market was still dominated by traditional onsite conferences. With the crisis, conference interpreting was obliterated. Even institutions of the European Union have had to drastically reduce the amount of interpreting they offer. The pandemic has accelerated the increased use of RSI, pushing many professionals to take this path with a minimum amount of technical equipment.

Almost all European (as well as international) associations of conference interpreters have drawn up guidelines, recommendations, or position papers (mostly referring to the International Organization for Standardization’s “ISO/PAS 24019—Simultaneous Interpreting Delivery Platforms—Requirements and Recommendations” regarding interpreting delivery platforms [IDPs]). These guidelines specify that RSI can be justified only under emergency conditions and that it still presents too many risks related to sound quality (e.g., acoustic shock, both quantitative and qualitative), quality and stability of the internet connection, power shortages, high cognitive load, technostress, liability (disclaimer!), as well as data protection and security (e.g., General Data Protection Regulation).

After having tested (and still testing) many IDP platforms, I’ve chosen to work from hubs. In my opinion (as well as for most, if not all, European conference interpreter associations), hubs are the solution that come closest to conventional onsite interpreting, allowing conference interpreters to work under safe conditions and in compliance with ISO standards and assisted by sound technicians. The number of these hubs is rapidly increasing in Europe. Hubs can use dedicated systems, IDP platforms, or web conferencing platforms depending on the customer’s needs and preferences. Customer education is always crucial in this area.

There has been no Europe-wide survey of just conference interpreters, so there’s no way to know the extent of the shift from conventional interpreting to RSI or the increase in the latter. Toward the end of this year (depending on whether there’s a second wave of the virus), we’ll be able to better understand the longer-term consequences of the coronavirus crisis for the Italian and European conference interpreting market.

**LORETO P. ANSALDO**

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I’ve worked as a community interpreter, translator, and language justice practitioner for the past four years. My focus is supporting local social justice community-based organizations and grassroots efforts. The shift to remote interpreting has been made easier by the generosity of colleagues around the world who have shared their knowledge through webinars, social media, and blog posts. Like many, I’ve attended countless presentations and practice sessions, for which I’m grateful. The language justice community has also come together to learn, create resources, and organize in our networks.

I primarily interpret on Zoom. Hacks are needed, but it’s a financially accessible option. I added the webinar feature to my personal Pro account to play around and learn collaboratively with my interpreting partners, and I’ve made my account available to organizations as needed. I’ve also learned the basics of VoiceBoxer (thank you Seven Sisters at www.7sisterslearn.com!), but have not interpreted on there yet. An essential part of this process has been supporting community members and organizations to navigate the new technologies. This commitment requires time and intention, but it’s worth it.

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Italian conference interpreters have been severely impacted by the coronavirus crisis due to our government’s ban on all conventions. In addition to citizens not being allowed to leave their homes (except out of necessity), here in Italy many so-called nonessential activities had to stop during the lockdown, leading to a sharp economic setback.

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Who Are ATA’s Certification Graders?

At present, ATA’s Certification Program enlists the services of more than 130 ATA members, who are commonly known as “graders.” That name, however, does not do full justice to the range of activities performed by these individuals on behalf of ATA and the program. Who are these people, how are they selected and trained, and what do they do?

All graders are ATA members who work professionally as translators and/or interpreters and are certified in their respective language pair. Potential new graders are identified by three main channels. First, if a candidate performs especially well on a certification exam, the graders of that language pair may request the translator’s name from ATA Headquarters. Second, a translator may be recommended to an existing grader by a colleague or client. Third, an individual will occasionally contact ATA Headquarters or the Certification Committee chair expressing a desire to become a grader.

Each workgroup, which is headed by a language chair (LC), considers the merits of potential new graders and, if possible, reaches a consensus decision about inviting them on board. The LC then sends the potential grader’s CV and references to the Certification Committee chair, who has the final say about whether to proceed with recruitment. In the case of a positive decision, the final step is a “grading test,” in which the candidate is given a prior actual exam and asked to grade it using the program’s tools (e.g., Flowchart for Error Point Decisions and Framework for Standardized Error Marking) and other materials. The prospective grader and the LC then discuss the results, and if satisfactory, the person becomes a new grader.

So, what are the criteria for becoming a grader? An individual should have ample experience working as a professional translator. A background in evaluating translation performance in other contexts is a big plus, but not required. Besides broad knowledge and competence, it’s also important for a grader to have experience in group projects, because grading is a highly collaborative activity. Therefore, each member of the team should be willing to learn and compromise, as well as be able to maintain humility and set their ego aside. Other sought-after qualities are compassion and awareness of the limitations imposed by exam conditions.

Once an individual is officially on board, training continues under the LC’s direction. For a certain period, the new grader is paired with the LC when grading exams, which offers further opportunity to align the grader’s practices with program standards. Of course, new graders also take part in the formal training opportunities available to all graders. These include a Wednesday afternoon session right before the conference, as well as an all-day grader meeting held each spring at ATA Headquarters. These sessions are essential opportunities for graders to fine-tune their assessment skills, share experiences and challenges with their colleagues, and contribute to enhancements of grading methodology, including testing new tools. In addition to these in-person training opportunities, the program is also developing online content, an enhancement that has been further spurred by the pandemic.

GRADER ACTIVITIES

I already mentioned that graders do much more than just mark exams and practice tests. The grading process itself is the only activity for which graders receive substantive compensation. By far the most time-consuming activity, for which graders receive next to no pay, is passage selection and preparation. This involves:

■ Identifying source-language texts that could be used for exam material.
■ Trimming them to a suitable length.
■ Revising them to eliminate unfair challenges, better balance the reasonable challenges, and improve cohesion.
■ Submitting them for inspection by the counterpart group (i.e., those who grade in the opposite direction, usually native speakers of the source text).
■ Preparing sample translations of the text and reevaluating its suitability on that basis.
■ Identifying and articulating challenges and submitting those materials to a passage selection task force (PSTF), which comprises experienced graders who assess whether the proposed passage meets the program’s overarching passage standards.
■ Only after the PSTF approves a passage does it go into use in the exam. At that point (or sometimes sooner), the workgroup prepares passage-specific guidelines (PSGs). At the very least, these guidelines consist of a list of the challenges previously identified by the workgroup, together with one or more successful solutions to these challenges, unsuccessful solutions, and errors markings for the latter (e.g., error category and points). After the passage goes into use, the PSGs are augmented continuously by adding information about errors actually encountered in grading and how they were marked, which promotes consistency throughout the specific workgroup. Maintaining the PSGs and consistency in general is another time-consuming task performed by graders, often requiring extensive consultation by email, Skype, and other means of communication.

Despite the volume of work, much of it unpaid, most graders find the job extremely rewarding. Anyone who is interested in taking on this task or getting more information is welcome to contact me (david@stephensontranslations.com) or Caron Bailey, the Certification Program manager, at caron@atanet.org.

NOTES

1. Exceptions are graders in newly offered language pairs, who are carefully vetted through ATA’s professional networks. These graders set up their exams under the mentorship of the Certification Committee, then grade exams until newly certified replacements can be recruited, allowing the initial graders to cycle out and earn their own certification.
2. The language chair position is rotated among the workgroup’s members on a regular basis.
3. Each exam is graded by two graders, who must agree on the pass/fail evaluation.
4. A small fee is paid for producing a sample translation during the passage selection process.

David Stephenson, CT is the chair of ATA’s Certification Committee. An ATA-certified German>English, Dutch>English, and Croatian>English translator, he has been an independent translator for over 30 years, specializing in civil litigation and creative nonfiction. Contact: david@stephensontranslations.com.
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