
Vocational Opportunities for Linguists

INTERPRETING

QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED FOR INTERPRETING:

The interpreter must be exceptionally fluent in the languages that he or she interprets, and his or her speech must be free of any objectionable accent or impediment. At the very least, the aspiring interpreter should be well and broadly educated and almost bilingual, with a fairly long period of residence abroad being almost indispensable. Practical experience in several specialized fields is helpful and a knowledge of political science and economics is important.

Knowledge of language is only one prerequisite. The other is a genuine aptitude for interpreting, which is by no means synonymous with being bilingual. A surprising number of bilingual persons cannot listen to a speech or a statement in one language and then repeat clearly and precisely in another language the ideas that have just been presented. Simultaneous interpreting requires an additional skill of listening intently to one language while speaking another language at the same time.

ESCORT INTERPRETING:

Escort interpreters accompany visiting delegations or individuals and interpret for them in generally informal situations. There are more escort interpreters than conference interpreters because more languages are in demand for escort interpreting. The temporary assignments in this field are just as uncertain and sporadic. Escort interpreting should not be viewed as a permanent career or as a sole means of livelihood; while the work is extremely interesting and educational and can be most rewarding as a contribution to international understanding, most people eventually tire of the frequent and even constant travel involved.

CONFERENCE INTERPRETING:

Opportunities in the field of conference interpreting (generally known as simultaneous interpreting) are fairly limited. The United Nations has a staff of some 98 interpreters, all of whom are required to know extremely well at least two and preferably three of the UN conference languages, which are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The next largest group of interpreters in a national or international organization in the United States (not including the Armed Forces) is in the State Department. The State Department normally has 50 or so linguists on its interpreting and translating staff, of whom 20 or so are primarily interpreters. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Organization of American States, INTELSTAT, also hire a small number of interpreters on full-time basis in national and international agencies. Vacancies are few and far between, with many applicants applying for each opening.

The free-lance conference interpreting field in the United States is made up of experienced interpreters, who compete for the opportunity of interpreting at international conferences on scientific, economic, political, and other subjects. Except for the very few best known and most experienced interpreters, who are frequently multilingual rather than merely bilingual, free-lancing as a conference interpreter is, therefore, rather an uncertain occupation.

Practically the only languages used in international conferences in the United States are English, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.



United States Office of Personnel Management



TRANSLATING

QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED FOR TRANSLATING:

Translators of written documents are in greater demand than interpreters in both national and international agencies as well as in private industry. The United Nations has 250-300 translators; the State Department has about one-tenth that number; most international agencies and some United States agencies have smaller translating staffs.

Most translator positions require the ability to translate from several foreign languages into English, or to write (advertising copy; technical specifications; or diplomatic, informal, or scientific material, for example) in a foreign language at an educated native level. A broad background of education and experience is required to translate documents on many diverse subjects.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

There are also other vocational opportunities for students of languages (such as bilingual secretary or teaching) but the most widespread use of linguistic ability is to supplement other skills and knowledge. The United States Information Agency, for example, uses foreign-language announcers and script writers. Other agencies employ analysts in any scientific and technical fields who may be required to read a foreign language. In many fields of specialization the person who knows one or more foreign languages has a distinct advantage in competing for a job and in keeping up with what is going on in his or her professional field in other parts of the world. In the field of foreign affairs, the State Department is placing increased emphasis on the language knowledge of its Foreign Service Officers.

TRANSLATING & INTERPRETING

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