

# Spoken Language Interpreter Job Description

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This document seeks to clarify what spoken language interpreters do, especially for areas of specialty and language pairs that have no established path to certification. It focuses on the common knowledge, skills and abilities required in all fields, with examples taken from specific fields for clarification. The referenced certifications and terminology are based on standards in place in the United States. Therefore, English is one of the assumed spoken languages for this document. The authors and collaborators include experienced representatives of many different fields and

language pairs. Sources are referenced in endnotes and at the end of the document.

## Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

Translators convey meaning from a written text from one language into another, in writing, with the benefit of research tools and time to review their product. Interpreters, on the other hand, convey meaning verbally from one language into another in real time. Therefore, they must prepare in advance by studying specialized terminology and availing themselves of any relevant materials.

Interpreters work in many different settings, providing oral translation between people with no or limited English proficiency (LEPs) and English speakers. They do so accurately, in a culturally appropriate manner, preserving confidentiality, without allowing their own views to interfere and without allegiance to any side.

### Interpreting protocols

Interpreters speak in the first person, as you would in normal conversation. For example, they say, "What is your name?" instead of "He asked what your name is."

When interpreters need to make a comment, they speak in the third person. For example, "The interpreter requests a clarification about..."

### Modes of interpreting

Interpreters apply three modes of interpreting according to the needs of the setting.<sup>i</sup>

- Sight translation, where the interpreter reads a text written in one language and conveys it in another language. This mode of interpreting is often used to assist in filling out forms or to convey follow-up instructions. It may also be used in round table meetings, negotiations or technical settings, where discussions are based on documents available in only one language. Sight translation is for informational purposes only and cannot substitute a written translation. The interpreter should have some time to preview the document before beginning the sight translation.
- Consecutive interpreting, where the interpreter conveys the message after the speaker pauses (about every 40 words<sup>ii</sup>). This requires that the interpreter manage the flow of the conversation. At times, people speak several sentences before pausing, for segments of as long as 10 minutes. Interpreters should be ready to take notes to aid their memory retention.
- Simultaneous interpreting, where the interpreter conveys the message while the speaker continues to speak. There is always a lag of about one phrase. The average speed of speech varies in different settings.
  - 120 to 150 words per minute in healthcare and school settings.<sup>iii</sup>
  - 140 to 160 words per minute in court settings.<sup>iv, v</sup>
  - 160 to 280 words per minute in conference settings. (Prepared speeches have been measured at 280 words per minute.)

Relay interpreting is used in both consecutive and simultaneous modes. At times, there is no interpreter for the language pair needed. Therefore, an intermediary interpreter is needed as a bridge. For example: English to Spanish to Mixteco, or English to Thai to Pwo Karen..

### Team Interpreting

Interpreting is a cognitively taxing task. After approximately twenty minutes of sustained interpreting, the quality of the interpretation begins to deteriorate. Therefore, interpreters work in teams for interpreting assignments lasting longer than an hour. <sup>vi</sup>

### Interpreting Equipment

When interpreting in person in the simultaneous mode, interpreters frequently use specialized equipment. They may use portable equipment, like that of tour guides, or be in a booth that is hardwired for incoming and outgoing sound. When not using equipment, they whisper into the listener's ear.

### Ethics

Interpreters all follow professional standards and codes of ethics related to confidentiality and the commitment to render a faithful interpretation. In addition, interpreters are bound by specialized codes of professional conduct for the fields in which they work. Court interpreters swear an oath to abide by the code of ethics of the judicial branch<sup>vii</sup> for which they interpret. Health care interpreters abide by the code of ethics of the National Council for Interpreters in Health Care.<sup>viii</sup> Some states have also developed codes of ethics for interpreters in school settings.

### Remote Interpreting Technology

When interpreters are not at the same location as the people who need their services, they can still provide services remotely.

- Interpreters may use technologies such as:
  - telephones,
  - virtual consoles such as those set up by remote simultaneous interpreting platforms,
  - teleconferencing platforms,
  - a combination of these systems.

When interpreting as a team, the location of each interpreter also impacts communication within the team. Both partners could be:

- in the same location with a technician (hub),<sup>ix</sup>
- in the same location without a technician, or
- in separate locations.

When interpreting remotely, a separate technical assistant should be available to troubleshoot and moderate the event.

- When using teleconferencing platforms, it is highly recommended that all participants wear headsets with an incorporated microphone. This improves the participants' experience.

### Translation of Written Texts

Employers of interpreters may expect them to translate.<sup>x</sup> Medical interpreters often write the patient's responses in intake forms in the target language (English) and sometimes translate brief written instructions for how to take medications, or translate short texts. Any translation provided is done on the spot, without a reviewer or references to consult. It is not the same as a translation done by a professional translator who has been commissioned to do so.

## Qualifications

### Required Language Proficiency

An individual's interpretation performance depends on their level of command of English and another language (working languages). Interpreters can prove their language proficiency in their working languages through interpreting certification exams or by testing for listening comprehension and speaking proficiency in both languages. However, language proficiency tests do not verify message transfer skills. Certification exams that test at least one mode of interpreting in both languages are the most reliable way to verify interpreting skills.

An Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level 3 (Professional)<sup>xi</sup> or a Superior score on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL),<sup>xii</sup> scale should be the minimum proficiency level. However, an ILR 2+ or ACTFL Advanced Mid is accepted by the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI) as a prerequisite to take the healthcare interpreter certification exam.

### Professional Interpreting Certification

There is a broad spectrum of credentials available for interpreters to prove their competence according to the setting.<sup>xiii</sup> Certification exams are designed to reflect the realities of the field (psychometrically validated).<sup>xiv</sup> Instructional courses provide certificates for participants, but not certification.<sup>xv</sup>

Certified interpreters are able to provide documentation showing the certifying or assessment body, subject matter expertise, and specific language combination levels assessed.

Interpreters achieve certification by passing an oral exam that tests performance skills in at least one mode of interpreting. These tests are meant to simulate real-life interpreting situations. The certification prerequisites may include written exams and mandatory training. Interpreters maintain their certification through continuing education and are bound by a code of professional conduct.

When certification exams are unavailable for the required language pair and setting, interpreters can demonstrate a high level of listening comprehension and speaking proficiency in both working languages. According to the Oregon courts, an ILR level 3 (Professional)<sup>xvi</sup> or a Superior score on the ACTFL<sup>xvii</sup> scale should be the

minimum proficiency.<sup>xviii</sup> However, an ILR 2+ or ACTFL Advanced Mid is accepted by the NBCMI<sup>xix</sup> as a prerequisite to take the certification exam.

### Desirable Qualifications

- Bachelor's degree (four years of tertiary education)
- Interpreting coursework
- Professional certification in translation if the interpreter is required to translate.

## Physical requirements

Interpreters need to:

- Be able to see and read paper or electronic documents in order to sight translate them, with or without accommodations.
- Hear both working languages clearly, with or without accommodations.
- Be able to take notes, with or without accommodations.
- Have well-developed short-term memory and working memory skills.

## Resources

### Industry Standards

- [ASTM F2089-15 Standard Practice for Language Interpreting](#)
- ISO 13611:2014 Interpreting — Guidelines for community interpreting. Also in French, Russian
- ISO 18841:2018 Interpreting services — General requirements and recommendations. Also in French, Russian
- ISO 20228:2019 Interpreting services — Legal interpreting — Requirements. Also in French, Russian
- ISO/CD 23155:2020 Interpreting services — Conference interpreting — Requirements and recommendations (under development as of May 2020 )

### Translation and Interpretation Procurement Series

By the Federal Coordination and Compliance Section at LEP@usdoj.gov

- [\*TIPS for Working with Telephone Interpreters\*](#)
- [\*Before you hire / ask yourself: "What are my project's needs?"\*](#)
- [\*What does it mean to be a Certified linguist?\*](#)

### Credentialing bodies

- [Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters](#)
- [The National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters](#)
- [Federal Court Interpreters – United States Courts](#)
- [National Center for State Courts – Language Access Services Center](#)
- [International Association of Conference Interpreters](#)
- [United States Department of State](#)

### Standards for Interpreting Equipment

- ISO 20108:2017 Simultaneous interpreting — Quality and transmission of sound and image input — Requirements

- ISO 20109:2016 Simultaneous interpreting — Equipment — Requirements
- ISO 2603:2016 Simultaneous interpreting — Permanent booths — Requirements
- ISO 4043:2016 Simultaneous interpreting — Mobile booths
- ISO 22259:2019 Conference systems — Equipment — Requirements
- ISO/PAS 24019:2020 Simultaneous interpreting delivery platforms — Requirements and recommendations

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<sup>i</sup> [Modes of interpreting](#): Simultaneous, consecutive and sight translation, NAJIT, 2006

<sup>ii</sup> [Sentence Length Has declined 75% in the Past 500 Years](#), The Acropolitan0

<sup>iii</sup> [Average speaking rate and words per minute](#), Virtual Speech, accessed November 14, 2020

<sup>iv</sup> [Court Interpreter Exam Overview](#), page 3, National Center for State Courts, Language Access Services Section

<sup>v</sup> [Examinee Handbook](#), United States Courts, Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination, page 6, Administrative Office of the United States Courts

<sup>vi</sup> [Team Interpreting in Court-Related Proceedings](#) (National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, NAJIT, May 2020)

<sup>vii</sup> NAJIT [Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities for Judiciary Interpreters](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [National Council on Interpreting in Healthcare National Standards for Interpreters](#)

<sup>ix</sup> [Reference Guide to Remote Simultaneous Interpreting](#), AIIC, 2020

<sup>x</sup> [Written Translation at Healthcare Interpreting Appointments](#), by Helen Eby, Tina Peña and Rita Weil, published by the ATA Interpreters Division in May 2019

<sup>xi</sup> [Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions: Speaking](#)

<sup>xii</sup> [Introducing the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012](#), ILR Presentation January 6, 2012, accessed from ILR website

<sup>xiii</sup> [Credentialing Opportunities for Interpreters](#), an ATA Interpreters Division Resource, accessed November 16, 2020

<sup>xiv</sup> [Validity of Psychometric Assessments](#), Psychometric Resource Center

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- xv [Certificate, Certification, or Both?](#) Institute for Credentialing Excellence
- xvi [Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions: Speaking](#)
- xvii [Introducing the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012](#), ILR Presentation January 6, 2012, accessed from ILR website
- xviii [Chart of Appropriate Scores for Oregon Interpreter Credentials](#)
- xix [NBCMI Certified Medical Interpreter Candidate Handbook](#), page 6, May 2020