



The Words We Use to Describe Ourselves

By Nataly Kelly

As translators and interpreters, we are accustomed to scrutinizing words. We think about their meanings, toy with synonyms and alternatives, and analyze the contextual soil in which they are planted. Our tendency to dive deeply into the meaning of a word is almost second nature. As a result, professional translators read words more carefully than most non-translators. Likewise, professional interpreters typically listen more closely to speech than non-interpreters. It is no wonder we care about words so much, because their meaning can either live or die by our hands (or mouths).

But how often do we really stop to think about the words we use to refer to ourselves? Among our peers and colleagues, we often bemoan the fact that the general public misuses the terms *translator* and *interpreter*. “But the distinction is so simple!” we exclaim. “Translators deal with written words; interpreters deal with spoken ones.” Why, we wonder, does everyone else have so much trouble remembering this? From our perspective, the way we use these terms is right, so the rest of the world must be wrong.

In my current role as a researcher and analyst, I often help investors, start-ups, and journalists come up to speed quickly on the language services industry. Most of them have no prior background or knowledge of the field. I always take great care to try to use the terms that practitioners in these professions use themselves. Obviously, I let them know that *translation* is not the same thing as *interpreting*. However, this distinction is not always as clear or simple as it seems.

In one call I took from a venture capital firm earlier this year, an especially bright investor seemed to understand the distinction between a translator and interpreter quite well. He was interested primarily in the interpreting market, so he asked me where companies find interpreters in the United States. I explained that the profession is quite segmented by industry, with court interpreters, medical interpreters, conference interpreters, military interpreters, and sign language interpreters all congregating in separate groups. When he asked me which association is the largest membership organization for interpreters in this country, I cited

one that has the word “translators” in its name.

“Wait a minute,” he interrupted, “Didn’t you just say that interpreters are different from translators?” I managed to answer his question, but he had pointed out an important contradiction in the way I was using these terms. The discussion then moved on to different segments of the interpreting market, and he wanted to know more about the world of judiciary interpreting. I gave a quick overview of different skills that court interpreters must master—sight translation. “Hold on,” he interjected, “I thought interpreters dealt with spoken words and translators dealt with written ones.” Ouch—he had me again. I provided the clarification, but felt slightly embarrassed that my supposedly straightforward distinction had failed me once more.

Then he began asking about the history of the market and different segments within it, as well as its trajectory. As I mentioned the fact that many translators formerly used Dictaphones and that some still use dictation software, I could practically hear him saying, “Aha! Spoken mixed

with written! Caught you again!” However, this time, with his prior objections fresh in my mind, I managed to beat him to the punch and provide an additional explanation before he could protest. But he did not need to. I already saw his point. For us, the intricacies of how we refer to and define our own professions seem plain as day. For outsiders, things are not so simple. So who is right?

In the world of linguistics, there is a concept known as *prescription*. Prescriptivists seek to standardize language, to teach others what is “correct,” and to enforce rules for things like grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Generally, people in the prescriptivist camp are resistant to the natural phenomenon of language change. Description, on the other hand, refers to the area of linguistics that records objectively how language is actually used by a given population. Most linguistic research falls into this category. It is impartial, scientific, and does not judge.

In our daily work as translators and interpreters, we often have to strike a balance between a prescriptive approach and a descriptive one. Our code of ethics requires us to be objective and free of bias in our work. We must choose terms that are most appropriate for the target audience if we want them to be understood. On the other hand, we also have to exercise a deep understanding of the rules of language for various audiences and social groups, and we often have to make judgment calls about which term will be deemed most acceptable. In other words, we adopt a mixture of both of these approaches when we carry out our work.

But when we *discuss* our work with outsiders, we tend to be almost entirely prescriptive. Instead of listening to what society believes to be

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the correct way of using the words that describe us, we resist and try to “educate” them on how we believe we should be described. Yet we are a minority. The people who are not translators and interpreters far outnumber us. Is it realistic to think that we can ever get people outside of the profession to change their views and the way they refer to us?

I looked for answers in a somewhat expected place—the dictionary. My trusty *Merriam-Webster* defines translation as, “a rendering from one language into another; *also*: the product of such a rendering.” Hmm. No mention of written words versus spoken ones. I needed a second opinion. Perhaps the British lexicographers would be on our side? No such luck. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines translation as, “the process of translating words or text from one language into another.” The second definition listed actually says, “a written or spoken rendering of the meaning of a word, speech, book, or other text in another language.”

What these definitions tell me is that, if we truly want to defend our position that translation and interpreting are two completely different and distinct activities, we need to convince not only everyone who *is not* part of our professions, but the people who write the actual dictionaries we rely on every day for our work. We trust those books to give us clear answers in so many instances, but

when it comes to describing our very professions, we do not want to trust what they say. Suddenly, our case is not looking too good.

Personally, my favorite area of linguistics has always been *sociolinguistics*, which looks at the effect of society on language. Sociolinguistic studies take a look at how cultural norms affect the way language is used. Why is this relevant? We are our own little social group, made up of hundreds of thousands of translators and interpreters throughout the world. Our viewpoint is valid and important, especially within the confines of our professions. But it is probably unrealistic of us to think that we will ever change everyone else’s mind, especially when they can say, “See? Even the dictionary says I’m right and you’re wrong! Take that, you so-called linguistic expert!” Oh, how it stings.

When it comes to choosing words that describe not only who we are but what we do, the situation gets even worse. Translators have it a bit easier, because most people understand the word *translation*. However, when the average person thinks of the word *interpretation*, they start thinking of subjectivity and individual viewpoints—the very opposite of what interpreters are meant to provide. I will never forget the time when I asked a layperson to describe the difference between translation and interpretation. He knowingly and self-assuredly stated, “A translation is an exact rendition, whereas an ➡

interpretation is an opinion.” As a result, many in the field use the term *interpreting* instead and avoid the word *interpretation* like the plague. Even the more cumbersome *interpreted utterance* seems a better choice than using a word that can be so terribly in conflict with how we view ourselves.

The list of potentially confusing terms we use to describe ourselves goes on and on. We throw around all kinds of words such as localization, transcreation, fixer, “terp,” and more. Once, I was even referred to by one of my less educated clients as “the interpreter.” While it did make the prescriptivist side of me chuckle, my inner descriptivist regarded it non-judgmentally as a creative hybrid.

After all, I had worked at times in my life as both an interpreter and a translator. Maybe it does make sense to have a word for people who do both.

The purpose of this discussion is not to suggest any answers. After all, whether prescriptivists like it or not, each person uses language uniquely, and our work-based social group will continue to use and define these terms as the majority of its members see fit. Likewise, mainstream society will continue making its own decisions, over which we have limited control.

No matter how earnest our attempts, we most likely will not change the words that society uses to talk about translation and interpreting. However, what we can and should change is how

frequently people talk about our work. It should be our goal to catapult translators and interpreters onto the stage before mainstream readers, so that they are not only impossible to ignore, but enjoyable to watch. We want others to see how powerful and important this work really is—not just in the heart of this writer, but in society at large—including the schoolteachers, police officers, government workers, attorneys, and nurses in your local community. Yes, even your next-door neighbor. Hopefully then, the very real and enormous contribution that our work makes will be felt, not just within our field, but in the wider world.

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