

What is an Interpreter?

by Rosa Burkard

When it comes to looking for a doctor, a lawyer, an architect, an accountant, a teacher . . . , nobody seems to have any problem as to the qualifications these professionals must have for us to trust and hire them: they must have a college degree, to begin with; doctors and lawyers must have completed their studies at a medical school and a law school, respectively, and the same is true for other professional occupations.

The search becomes blurry and uncertain when we need an interpreter (or translator). People have a vague idea that an interpreter is someone who knows foreign languages. What about the language level an interpreter must have? "Hmmm . . . , it doesn't really matter!" If his name is Li, "he should know Chinese, right?" Or if her mother was born in Guatemala, "her Spanish should be excellent!"

It is also known that an interpreter is someone who mediates between speakers of different languages. But does anybody wonder what training a person has to go through to be able to handle a simultaneous or consecutive interpretation? By the way, what is simultaneous or consecutive interpretation? We've all heard things like: "We went to Austria last year and my good friend Jack, who speaks 7 languages perfectly (it's always 7 languages!), interpreted for us"! Or, "My father-in-law was stationed in Italy during the Second World War; he is retired now, but he is looking for a part time job as a simultaneous interpreter in Italian."

The lack of knowledge about what it takes to become a professional interpreter is both appalling and frustrating. And what is frightening is the number of "Marias and Pedros", "Lis and Wons", "Fritz and Franz"... that are out there doing interpretation in Spanish, Chinese, German and many other languages in the courts, in medical settings, and even attempting conference interpretation without being qualified for such responsibilities. Even worse, there are cases where young children interpret for their mother or father at a medical visit! Nobody seems to bother to ask whether they are duly qualified or not, after all, "their fees are pretty good!" Or people may say, "he does not charge anything, it's my child".

Only when problems arise do people hit the roof: lawyers protest "the interpreter was really bad"; doctors complain that they cannot communicate with their patients; participants at international conferences grumble they were not able to follow the presentations because "the interpreters were so bad"; patients do not know what to do: "I'm not sure if the doctor said I have a femur or tumor," or "should I take a tea spoon or a table spoon?"

So, what should we look for when we hire an interpreter?

A professional interpreter is someone who fulfills three main requirements:

1) A command of the two languages he/she works with. To attain this level, the interpreter must have had advanced schooling in both languages, that is, no less than a college degree, preferably in translation and interpretation or a language-related program, and having lived for no less than 2 years in a country where his/her foreign language is spoken;

2) At least one year of training in consecutive and simultaneous interpretation if he/she does not have a college degree in translation and interpretation. Those interested in Court Interpreting

should pursue a certification in this area. Unfortunately, in the United States, only a few higher education institutions offer training in translation and interpretation; therefore the would-be-interpreter must work hard on his/her own, attend skill building workshops, pursue certifications through short training programs, etc.;

3) A general knowledge about domestic and international current events, and in particular, about the subject matters he/she interprets, including the appropriate technical terminology; otherwise, the interpreter will not be prepared to deal with the various situations he/she will be faced with. Continuous education is a must to keep our knowledge up-to-date.

Of course there are exceptions to the rules, but they are very few. There are many people out there, though, who *think* they are the exception. Beware!

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