



International Translation Day 2021

United Nations Office at Vienna
Conference Management Service

International Atomic Energy Agency
Division of Conference and Document Services



International Translation Day is celebrated every year on 30 September. It was launched in 2017 to acknowledge the global translation community and promote the translation profession worldwide.

This day is an opportunity to display pride in a profession that is becoming increasingly essential as awareness of the importance of multilingualism grows. The international community recognizes translation as both a trade and an art that play a key role in bringing nations together, facilitating dialogue, understanding and cooperation, contributing to development and strengthening world peace and security.

To commemorate the Day this year, six translators from UNOV and IAEA have answered questions about how they came to the profession, how technology has changed the way they work and how they see the future of translation. To hear the translators in their own words, click [here](#).



1. What inspired you to choose the profession of translator?

My first experience with translation goes back to my childhood. I grew up in a multilingual environment, where Arabic, Berber and French were the means of communication within my family. My Grandma, who was living with us and who could speak only Berber (a Moroccan language), often asked me to translate the news for her. This gave me great pleasure as she was so happy and grateful because, through these translations, she was able to know what was going on in the world. At that time, I didn't know that that wonderful and enjoyable activity might one day be my job. As I grew up, it was so obvious for me that translation was my dream profession.

I was also inspired to become a translator by being an avid reader of world classics, such as Don Quixote and Crime and Punishment, to name but a few. As I didn't speak Spanish or Russian, I had to read those and many other classics in one of the languages that I knew. That led me to wonder: what would have happened if those, or indeed any books, had been available only in their original language? It would have been a big loss for humanity!

- Meryeme Moukhliiss, Reviser, IAEA

A source of inspiration shared by all the translators interviewed was a passion for languages (including their own) and for other cultures. Many translators gain experience in the private sector before coming to the United Nations system, keen to be part of a multicultural workplace that espouses the principles of the United Nations.

2. What qualities make a successful translator and bring professional satisfaction?



A willingness to learn new things is one of the key qualities for translators to enjoy this profession, especially new things in the culture of the language we translate from.

- Meichen Liu, Translator, UNOV

Aside from proficiency in other languages, translators rely heavily on strong analytical skills to understand the true meaning of a text and convey it in the appropriate terminology and style in the target language. Intellectual curiosity, ability to write clearly in one's own language and attention to detail (sometimes a comma can change the whole meaning) are also crucial. All translators agreed that an open mind was another key quality: openness to language changing over time, openness to the target audience's needs, openness to new technology, and openness to accept that there is always room for improvement as learning is a lifelong process.

3. What is the role of a translator in international organizations and in the global community in general? Why is it important to have six translation sections in a UN organization today?



Translators ensure the mutual comprehension that is necessary for negotiations to move forward. To think that everyone nowadays speaks English is a misconception. Nuances are very important: delegations sometimes wage diplomatic battles over a single word.

Having six translation sections – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish – helps to ensure multilingualism within the United Nations. Delegates have an opportunity to choose a language of their choice when speaking and writing. Multilingualism also allows for the message of the United Nations to be communicated among a broader global audience speaking six of the most widely used

languages today.

- Alexey Fokin, Reviser, IAEA

Translators provide the medium through which stakeholders can interact to reach consensus on vital matters. They are the bridge across and between the world's different cultural backgrounds, and their work helps to promote understanding and tolerance.

It has been said that if you talk to a person in a language they understand, that speaks to their head; but if you talk to them in their own language, that speaks to their hearts. We are all much more proficient in the languages in which we were raised and educated. The multilingualism that the work of translators ensures is thus closely linked to the notions of equality and fairness: everyone should have equal and fair access to the same information. Translation into the six official languages guarantees such access for the largest possible share of the world's population.

4. How long does it take to translate a document and why? How many people are involved in producing a completed translation?



How long depends on many variables: How long is the document? What kind of text is it (e.g., legal, highly technical, politically sensitive)? How well-written is the original text (e.g., professionally edited vs. drafted by an author not comfortable writing in that language)? Is a translator available straight away or are they all busy working on other documents? How much researching needs to be done (e.g., legal texts with many footnotes require significant research and referencing)?

Translating UN documents is a complex task that involves many people: the document is first referenced, then translated, then revised for accuracy and appropriate language, and when necessary, subsequently refined and polished (e.g., speeches, declarations, resolutions). The desktop publishing team handles final formatting, supported by the work of proofreaders for the final quality check.

– Isabelle Boutriau, Reviser, UNOV

Other staff may also be involved. A programming officer will often match incoming texts to translators' strengths; a coordinator may be needed when a large text is divided among several translators in order to ensure consistency; subject-matter experts may be consulted to get clarification of concepts or terminology.

If the text is an update of a previously translated document, the process can go very fast with minor adjustments made and then proofreading. At the same time, complex formats such as interactive spreadsheets sometimes take up more time locating and arranging the text to be translated than the actual translation; while highly specialized texts can require hours of background and terminology research for just a single page.

5. In the context of international multilateralism, what are the main challenges for translation work?



In an international organization with people from all over the world, not everyone is communicating in their native language, so documents submitted for translation are sometimes not completely clear. The translator has to decide how best to handle that fact. For instance, there can be local references (such as a species of plant or an administrative body) that are highly specific to a region/country. This requires research to understand and then deciding how best to render them in the translation. Also, technical language can sometimes be highly specialized and the translator has to decide how much to explain, based on the translation's audience and purpose. The translator needs to ensure that the translation can be read by as wide an audience as possible.

- Neil Younger, Translator, IAEA

Translation at international organizations plays an important role in negotiations and diplomatic relations among member States, so translators must take care to avoid any cultural bias and work impartially. Also, diplomatic language is often intentionally ambiguous or vague. While the English wording of a resolution or a multilateral declaration may be the result of protracted negotiations among the parties, this cannot always be reflected properly in other languages and translators

therefore often face the challenge of striking a difficult balance between meaning and form. Translating such texts “in real time” while a conference is in session adds to the translator’s challenge, as time is very limited in order to come up with creative solutions.

Translators must also reconcile diverging terminology preferences among different countries, especially in documents dealing with innovative subjects, as different countries may have different ways to understand or regulate that subject.

6. It is sometimes heard that a good dictionary is the only thing a translator needs. Is that true? What tools are available to translators today and how good are they?



Not one good dictionary, but several! We often need to check more than one source. Also, we need different dictionaries for many subjects (law, medicine, pharmacology, engineering, physics, etc.).

But arguably the most powerful tool today are ‘translation memories’. These are enormous databases that store all the documents translated previously. They allow translators to research how a given term was translated historically and thus ensure consistency among documents that deal with the same subjects. In our documents, cross-referencing and citations are extremely frequent — doing that reliably would take much longer if it weren’t for those databases.

We also have machine translation software, which has improved considerably in the last decade and has created some hype. But we must curb the enthusiasm — machine translation can indeed be helpful in some texts, but it always requires careful editing, and plenty of corrections, by a trained professional, especially in highly technical subjects and in sensitive documents (like the ones we produce every day).

- Roberto Gracia, Translator, UNOV

Dictionaries alone can’t provide enough cultural background and contextual meanings to produce a good translation, and these days translators do most of their terminology research using Internet search engines. That said, today’s sophisticated MT (machine translation) and CAT (computer-assisted translation) tools are making for faster translation and greater consistency: they can reproduce pictures and diagrams, avoiding the need for time-consuming formatting and they are good at identifying previously translated text. Other technologies, such as optical character recognition, speech synthesis and voice-to-text software, are also helping to improve translation efficiency.

However, as their name suggests, they remain tools that help translators to do their work in an efficient, effective and consistent way. They are not a replacement for translators. For instance, they are less good at providing an overview of a document — because they chop up text into segments, and you thus lose the flow and how the sentences relate to each other. The final translation must always be reviewed in its assembled form, to make sure it all fits together. The tools offer speed and consistency; the translator ensures accuracy and quality.

Today these tools are moving into the cloud, enabling multiple translators to work on the same project simultaneously and share their progress in real time. More sophisticated tools are capable of recognizing a change made at the beginning of a text and reflecting it throughout the remainder of the text.

7. How do you see the translator's work 10 years from now?

In all languages, translators were unanimous in acknowledging – and welcoming – the advances in technology in their field. No one could imagine 10 years ago where we would be today, and the progress over the coming 10 years will be just as exciting. Translators foresee revising raw machine translation output as part of their future skills set. They will need specialized training in this very different task, since machines don't make the same kind of mistakes that human translators do. This is especially the case with newer neural machine translation, where the translations produced can sound fluent and authentic but they mask very serious errors; a less authentic-sounding machine translation, on the other hand, is likely to be treated with more caution.

As they embrace and adapt to more mature and sophisticated tools and new skills, translators will continue to play an important role in international organizations. They will be working more flexibly, and will enjoy wider options for knowledge exchange and transfer, instant information searching, real-time teamworking and communication.

What will remain the same will be the values of professionalism, commitment and continuous learning about language, subject matters and new tools as they become available.

8. What do you enjoy most in your profession?

In the translators' own words:

- Daily interaction with colleagues from my section as well as from other translation sections
- Learning new and interesting things – each translation is like a puzzle to be solved
- The opportunity to have a glimpse of our diverse world, across different cultures, through the bridge of languages
- Feeling part of a bigger project – having a wide overview of many aspects of my organization's work, rather than being involved in only one small part of it
- The opportunity to constantly perfect the command of my languages
- The variety, i.e., the fact that every document poses new challenges

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