

Bridging the language gap

Translation and interpretation courses offer students with solid language skills unique opportunities to help bridge national, cultural and linguistic divides. By Ann Morgan





Main picture
Delegates listen to their interpreters during a United Nations Human Rights Council session

Left
Tony Blair on official duty at the European Parliament in 2005 when he was UK Prime Minister

It's the 2016 United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference. Delegates have gathered from nearly 200 member states. A hush falls as your country's representative walks to the podium.

She opens her mouth to speak. And it's up to you to interpret her words into another language so the rest of the world can understand what she's got to say.

Such a scenario is all in a day's work for Vivian Xu. Now a freelance interpreter and lecturer at China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing, she recognises that the communication skills she learnt from two master's courses at the University of Leeds were very valuable. She graduated from the second in 2005, but was so fascinated by the subject that she returned to the university in 2012 to pursue a PhD in Interpreting Studies.

Xu might never have discovered her love of interpreting if she hadn't heard about it from friends while she was studying her first master's – in translation studies, which focuses on written work. Intrigued by the course's regular mock conferences (where students test their skills at relaying speech from one language to another as delegates

debate), she decided to take a closer look. Her research led her to stay on for the second master's – an MA in Conference Interpreting and Translation Studies. 'I had very little knowledge about what interpreting actually is,' she says. 'I went to the mock conference and it was amazing. The [people there] were students but they could do simultaneous interpreting: listening and talking at the same time.'

Xu's PhD supervisor and MA course director Dr Gracie Peng says some students don't realise the range of skills that interpreting – and the related written discipline of translation – involve. 'Most people think that as long as they have languages they can become interpreters or translators, which is quite deceptive,' she says. 'You might be able to run but that doesn't mean you can run for the Olympics. We need people who have very solid language skills to begin with. This is not a language course.'

Required to have a high level of competence in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian or Spanish – and an IELTS score of at least 7.0 if English is not their mother tongue – to get on to the course, interpreting students at the University of Leeds learn a wide range of specialist skills. Along with research techniques and single or bidirectional simultaneous interpreting, these skills include detecting the needs of clients, mediating between different cultures, global awareness and solving linguistic problems on the spot.

The course began in 2001 and previous course graduates have found jobs with incredibly high-profile yet diverse organisations, including the UN, the BBC, the World Bank, Nissan, Google and Microsoft. As such an impressive list of alumni career paths indicates, the skills the course offers are highly valued. Some companies even attend its assessment exercises to headhunt future employees.

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Nevertheless, the translation of written work brings with it an equally wide array of challenges. At University College London (UCL), Professor Theo Hermans supervises PhD Translations Studies students as they tackle what may be the largest single piece of work of their lives. The thesis topics of his current cohort vary widely, ranging from translated plays staged in London in 2005 to translating postcolonial novels into Polish. Yet in order to achieve these feats, each of his students has to develop certain skills.

'The main skill is a sense of cultural difference,' says Hermans. 'Students deal with texts that have been relocated or redeployed. All the words acquire a different connotation because they have been used in a different setting. That's what makes it interesting.'

Compare and contrast

For Marlies Gabriele Prinzl, an Austrian student whose PhD focuses on the linguistic differences between nine different translations of the same novel, the choices translators face as they navigate between language worlds are particularly clear. Using corpus linguistics – a computerised process that allows the digital comparison of texts – she is able to analyse the differences between the editions more closely than ever before. 'It's been very interesting,' she says. 'Something may not strike us as being very innovative on a linguistic level, but if you start comparing it you can see [it] is very different from all the others. One particular translator changes the grammar a lot more than the others and seems to be doing it as a reaction to the other translators.'

This scope for different renditions of the same text can have significant practical implications, particularly when it comes to legal documents. With millions of pounds riding on contracts and cases that often rest on the interpretation of a single word, companies rely on the skill of their translators to help them broker watertight international deals. But, as barrister and translator Richard Delaney explains, excellent translation skills alone are not enough. 'In order to be able to translate legal texts you need to understand the legal concepts in both languages,' he says. 'The



Above
Argentinian President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner speaks with US Vice-President Joe Biden (right) as her translator leans over to assist

Left
The Rosetta Stone, an ancient Egyptian inscription. Its translation provided the key to the modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs

danger is that people think, "Oh yes, I know what this means" and translate it accordingly but don't quite realise the consequences.'

This need for specialist knowledge prompted Delaney to set up City University's Legal Translation MA course in 2008. Designed to accommodate working translators, the course breaks down into eight intensive four-day segments, which can be spread over one or two years. This enables the students – roughly half of whom are non-UK nationals – to continue working anywhere in the world and fly in to attend lectures when required.

Germany-based translator Sabine Hellmann took advantage of this flexibility when she began the course in 2009. With 20 years' experience working as a translator, Hellmann



Above
Former England football manager Fabio Capello (centre) speaks to the media with his translator on his left

was keen to get a more thorough grounding in the English and American legal systems so that she could trade off her ability to translate complex legal concepts accurately. 'Like any job, if you really want to deliver good work you have to specialise,' she says. 'I thought it might be a good idea to specialise in legal translation and it was.'

An expanding market

As well as the solid training in legal concepts she was looking for, Hellmann found the course gave her a valuable global network of colleagues and led to regular work for the European Union (EU). With many companies willing to pay £70 to £80 per page of legal translation – roughly five times as much as literary translators charge – there can be other advantages to training in this field too.

Career prospects are also flourishing for translators and interpreters in other areas. With the expansion of the EU, and more and more companies, organisations and governments launching global collaborations, there is a growing call for people who can help bridge cultural and linguistic divides.

At Aston University, Professor of Translation Studies Christina Schaeffner gets frequent phone calls from companies looking for trained

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translators, particularly those with English as a first language, who, it appears, are in short supply. This shortage has led to a range of initiatives to encourage more native English speakers to train as translators and build links with employers, including the UK government-funded Routes into Language Programme and the National Network for Translation.

Schaeffner explains that the range of employment opportunities is broader than many realise. 'When you talk about translation, people think of something they had as part of their foreign language classes at school, sitting there with the text and the dictionary,' she says. 'But in the translation industry you have dubbing, subtitling and people working as project managers too.'

Zimbabwean graduate John Matipano discovered the course had value for less directly related ambitions. Having completed Aston's MA in Translation Studies in 2008 – during which he focused on the translation of marriage metaphors in The Bible into his first language (Shona) – he found the skills he learned served him well in his work teaching English for Academic Purposes. 'Translation develops your analytical perspective,' he says. 'You get to understand things differently; things you always apply when you are teaching.'

European Commission speechwriter Ubaldo Stecconi goes further still. Having taught translation for 15 years, he began a part-time, distance-learning PhD with UCL's Professor Hermans in 2001 shortly after starting his full-time role in Brussels. His aim was to consolidate a mass of material he had gathered during his time as a scholar and develop a sound theoretical foundation for the definition of translation as an independent academic discipline. In practice, he found that the programme gave him more than he hoped.

'I am convinced that I wouldn't have been able to write speeches for the president of the European Commission if it hadn't been for the PhD,' he says. 'It keeps you alert all the time. And this is exactly what someone who works closely with text all the time needs.' ■

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Find your niche

The increasing number of collaborations between scientists and corporations around the world is opening up a wealth of opportunities for translators and interpreters who can combine linguistic expertise with a decent knowledge of particular fields. To cater for this market, a range of specialist courses is springing up at universities around the UK to give students the tools to work in these niche areas. These include programmes such as Imperial's MSc in Scientific, Technical & Medical Translation and the University of Surrey's MA in Business Translation with Interpreting.

In 2010, the University of Portsmouth launched its MA in Translation and Technical Communication in response to industry feedback on the career paths open to many translators.

'The majority of translation done globally is technical writing,' says course leader Stephen Crabbe. 'We were hearing increasingly from manufacturers internationally that their technical writing and translation departments were housed together. We felt that giving translators a grounding in technical writing would not only give them that edge in the interview process but could subsequently improve their chances of being promoted.'

Russian graduate Olga Terentieva, who studied on the course in its first year, found that this grounding in writing for specific audiences, as well as file formats and computer-assisted translation tools, gave her a distinct advantage when it came to looking for freelance translation work for accounting firms.

'It is about presenting information in a way that is more user friendly,' she says. 'The main goal of any author is to make his or her information interesting and useful. This course is about how to write in a way that will attract your readers.'