

BEST PRACTICES GUIDE 07: Translation and Interpreting Certification and Accreditation

Translation and Interpreting Certification in the United States

Unlike the governments of many European countries, the US government does not certify translators and interpreters. However, there are significant accreditations available to interpreters and translators working in the US, which are accorded by professional organizations. Furthermore, certain state and federal agencies and court systems maintain certification and/or qualification programs for internal purposes.

In these contexts, linguists are only accredited or certified in specific language pairs (e.g. English to French, French to English, English to Spanish, Spanish to English) and with respect to either translation or interpreting. Note that interpreting and translation are two very different activities. Interpreting is translation of the spoken word, while translation applies to the translation of written texts. Any single accreditation or certification from any of the sources discussed below, is given to a linguist for a single language pair and function (e.g. English to Spanish translation).

Affidavits of Accuracy

In the US, if you require that a translation be certified as accurate and complete, it is necessary to obtain an affidavit of accuracy from the translator or agency. Any reputable agency will be accustomed to this procedure, and will provide the affidavit for the final translation after it has been translated by one qualified linguist, and checked by at least one other. Such a process of multiple checks followed by an affidavit of accuracy, is the industry standard when a certified translation is required.

Agency Affiliation

It is often wise to go through a reputable translation agency for another reason. Agencies pre-qualify their translators and interpreters, either by testing them or by using them over a period of time. Such an affiliation with a reputable agency is in effect another type of credential indicating a translator's professional standing.

The American Translators Association

Whether you go through an agency or not, there are significant credentials held by both translators and interpreters that are worth looking into. The most prevalent US translator accreditation is that of the American Translators Association. The ATA tests translators in the language pair or pairs in which they work. Currently, the ATA provides accreditation for 24 language pairs.

The ATA accreditation is a reliable credential. The tests are not easy, with pass rates below 20% overall. All other things being equal, if you have a choice between an ATA certified translator and one who is not, the former is a better choice. Be sure, however, that your translator is actually accredited in the language pair you have specified.



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Many translators work in several pairs while only being accredited in one. Note that the ATA does not offer accreditation for interpreters.

Note also that the ATA also has an agency membership which requires only annual dues, but no other qualification.

The United States Government

The US State Department tests all translators and interpreters whom it employs. Other U.S. government agencies test translators and/or interpreters. Someone who has passed such a test is duly qualified to work for the government agency in question, but is not certified with respect to translation or interpreting done in any other context. As with ATA accreditation, this credential speaks to the fact that the linguist in question has passed a rigorous test. In no sense does such a credential imply that the translator or interpreter's work is certified. Qualification by the State Department is a particularly significant credential for translators and interpreters, and generally indicates significant expertise.

Federal Court Interpreter Certification Program

According to the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Program, “The Court Interpreters Act of 1978 and subsequent Amendments require the Director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOUSC) to define criteria for certifying interpreters qualified to interpret in federal courts. The Act also requires the Director to maintain a list of interpreters who have been certified. Certified interpreters are placed on an eligibility list from which court interpreters may be selected by the local officials of the United States District Courts.”

The FCICE is only available for Spanish, Haitian Creole and Navajo. The certification is administered under contract by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts, the National Center for State Courts (see below) in collaboration with CPS Human Resource Services and Second Language Testing. In lieu of certification via an examination, interpreters of other languages receive designations as “professionally qualified” or “language skilled” from the AOUSC, based upon a review of other qualifications and/or a demonstration of competency.

State Court Interpreter Certification

The National Center for State Courts (<http://www.ncsc.org>) is an independent, nonprofit organization, founded in 1971 at the urging of Chief Justice Warren E. Burger. Among other initiatives, it provides research, consulting, technical assistance and education in language interpreting. It administers the Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification, which more than half of the states use as their test for State Court interpreters. Other states have individual and/or reciprocal certification. In general, anyone certified by a state as such, should be considered as a reliable professional interpreter. However, if you require a court certified interpreter in one state and you propose to work with an interpreter certified by another, make sure that the two states have certification reciprocity.

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The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators

NAJIT is a professional association that was first established in New York as a non-profit organization. In 1978, it was incorporated as the Court Interpreters and Translators Association. Currently, NAJIT offers certification for Spanish interpreters and translators only. It is conferred on the basis of an oral and a written exam, with a specific emphasis on fitness to perform in a judiciary context. This credential signifies professional excellence, but is not officially recognized by any court system.

Other Translator and Interpreter Associations in the US

There are several other associations and guilds for translators and interpreters in the US. In general, they do not require or confer certification or accreditation. However, membership in any such organization gives at least an indication of a linguist's basic dedication to craft and professionalism. A fairly comprehensive list of these organizations may be found at <http://www.deraaij.com/irt/>

Foreign Government Certification

Unlike the US, many other nations require that translators and interpreters be certified. Typically, the certifying body issues stamps, seals or other indices to certified translators. Note that such a stamp on a document has no validity in the US in general. Rather, such certification is required by the respective national government of anyone who intends to do professional translation work, much as doctors and lawyers are required to be licensed in the US and elsewhere.

As explained above, in the United States, if you require that your translation be “certified” as accurate, the only option is to request that the translator or translation vendor supply a notarized affidavit of accuracy, stating that the translation is accurate and complete.

International Translators’ Associations and Organizations

There are numerous international professional organizations for interpreters and translators. Many are merely professional associations that have no requirements beyond membership fees; others require credentials or the successful completion of examinations. A fairly complete list may be found at <http://www.deraaij.com/irt/>.

With respect to interpreting in particular, the **International Association of Conference Interpreters** is notable. Its membership requirements are fairly stringent and require significant documented work experience and sponsorship by three active members.

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Applicable University Degrees and Certification

Many US and foreign universities offer degrees in translation studies. The courses of study toward these degrees vary widely, and may focus upon a specific type of translation e.g. literary or technical translation. Masters degrees in interpreting or translation usually imply that the linguist has passed an exam and written a thesis in his or her area of specialization. While this is not an assurance of excellence by any means, it is a good indication of basic competence and professionalism.

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