

THE TERM “TRANSLATION”: CONCEPT, DEFINITIONS AND USAGE

1.1. Translation, translating and translation studies

As illustrated by the examples in **Example 1.1**, the term translation can refer to an activity, a product and the scholarly field that studies both the activity and the product(s). The distinction between the process and the product is not always clear-cut, as the two concepts often overlap, whereby it can be difficult to draw a clear line where the one ends and the other begins.

Example 1.1: The term “translation”

1. **Product.** *The brochure was a translation from English, so it did not work well in the Russian market.*
2. **Process.** *The interns were working on a translation of the letter from the principal to the workers.*
3. **Field.** *Translation is sometimes considered an area of applied linguistics.*

The scholarly field that studies translation and interpreting and related phenomena is known as translation studies. The name was first coined by Holmes (1988), as we have already seen this, and has since become established wherever the field is cited. In the last few years some degree of confusion has arisen, however, with regard to the name translation studies.

As interest in translating and interpreting grows, teaching and training programs of various types have become common in universities and other educational institutions. With the rise of area studies and cultural studies, it seemed logical to some to simply apply the same template to translation and interpretation, and refer to any program dealing with translation and interpretation as a Translation (and Interpreting) Studies program. Unfortunately, in some cases the label was applied (often by well-intended administrators, clearly not familiar with the field) to programs whose primary concern is the training and education of translators and interpreters (i.e., the practice of translating and/or interpreting), with little or no reference to the scholarly field itself. Within the translation studies field, these areas are normally specified and referred to as *translator and interpreter training or education* (T&I). Degrees from such programs are frequently called an “MA in Translation,” perhaps with a language specification, while advanced theoretical degrees may be titled “PhD in translation studies.”

Translation refers to the process of, or the product resulting from, transferring or mediating written text(s) of different lengths (ranging from words and sentences to entire books) from one human language to another. This preliminary definition attempts to capture the essence of the concept of translation, i.e., the core elements that most scholars and practitioners will agree are present in the concept of translation: (i) written text; (ii) transfer; (iii) from one natural language to another, as summarized below.

Core elements of translation:

- (i) written texts
- (ii) transfer or mediation
- (iii) from one natural language to another

It is important to stress that translation deals with the transfer of written text. When the text or the medium is oral, however, the term used is interpreting or interpretation. In lay circles, one can sometimes hear the terms translation and translator being used to refer to interpreting and interpreter, with no distinction being made with regards to medium. In other areas, also, Translation with a capital "T" can be used to refer to both translation and interpreting as forms of mediation, whereas translation with a lower-case "t" means translation.

In translating, the language from which a text is translated is known as the **source language (SL)** and the language of the translated product is the **target language (TL)**. What is also referred to as the original text is generally known as the **source text (ST)** and the translated text is the **target text (TT)**. For instance, in a translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Spanish, the ST would be the English original text and the Spanish translation the TT. Practice 1.1 contains an example with commentary that will help you test your understanding of the notions SL, TL, ST and TT.

Practice 1.1: On SL, TL, ST and TT

Consider *Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3* (see the .pdf pages). What would be the SL, TL, ST and TT for each one of these figures? You may need to infer some information based on the texts.

Commentary

Upon examination of the texts, you will see that all three figures are translations (commissioned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Therefore, the languages they are written in are the TLs, namely, Chinese (Figure 1.1), Vietnamese (Figure 1.2) and Russian (Figure 1.3). Considering who commissioned the translations, we can safely assume that the language that they were translated from is English; therefore, the SL for Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 is English. Each figure contains one TT, in each of the TLs. The ST is not provided.

| | Figure 1.1 | Figure 1.2 | Figure 1.3 |
|----|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| SL | English | English | English |
| TL | Chinese | Vietnamese | Russian |
| ST | (not shown) | (not shown) | (not shown) |
| TT | Figure 1.1 | Figure 1.2 | Figure 1.3 |

Up to this moment we have formulated a preliminary definition of translation, which includes the core elements of (i) written text; (ii) transfer or mediation; (iii) from one human language to another. The goal was to start from a definition that is simple and as objective as possible, and that does not include specific views of translation. Existing definitions, such as those that can be found in translation books and manuals, tend to be more complex. They are also quite varied. One reason numerous definitions exist for translation is that they often include particular, specialized views as to how translation should be carried out, and specific viewpoints on what translation should be and how it should be performed (and these are, of course, quite varied).