



Confessions of a conference interpreter

I would love to start this article with the words “Hi, my name’s Michelle and I’m a conference interpreter,” but I’m afraid that would prompt readers to want to start patting me on the back consoling!

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Many readers will recognise this topic as being related to the theme chosen for [InterpretAmerica’s recent summit](#), which I used as inspiration. But instead of tackling the question of professional identity by looking at what a conference interpreter is, I have decided that it would be more interesting to address the question the other way around, and look primarily at **what a conference interpreter is not** – or at least what I am not.

Only once I’ve come clean about all of the things I *cannot* do will I look at what it is exactly that I *do* do for a living. After this, I will attempt to draw some conclusions for readers to take home (hopefully this promise of a take-home message will encourage you to stick around until the end!).

What I am not

I am not a language teacher. Strangely enough, my passion for languages and my love of teaching have not come together to make me a good language teacher. I know, because I have been fortunate enough to have had many an excellent teacher over the years, and **I can’t do what they do.** I have never been able to come up with engaging, creative ways to explain the intricacies of a foreign language to learners.

Also, I simply don’t have the oodles of patience that a language teacher needs. I just have to look at the earnest, eyes-not-rolling-to-the-heavens face of my Portuguese teacher, as she happily explains to my thick self (for what is probably the seventeenth time) the difference between *futuro do conjuntivo* and *infinitivo pessoal* and why I can’t just use *fizemos* and *fazemos* interchangeably, to know that I can’t do that. **For a language teacher, patience is not a virtue, it’s a survival tactic.**

I am not a community interpreter. This is because, quite frankly, I’m quite sure no courtroom or hospital would have me. I am one of those conference interpreters with one “active” language (English) and several “passive” languages (French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and maybe even Portuguese one day). I can only interpret into English from all of the other languages I speak, but not the other way around. A fat lot of use that is to anyone in a communicative situation requiring someone to work both ways between two languages, as is the case in community interpreting.

Besides, **I don’t have the necessary training or certification to do this kind of specialised work.** Certification is one of the issues that was discussed at the InterpretAmerica summit, and it’s something I personally feel quite strongly about. There are different types of interpreting, and so there should ideally be different types of formal training and certification for each. I was fortunate

enough to teach on a community interpreting course for some seasons several years back (there are some skills that overlap, relating to memory, consecutive note-taking, language acquisition in specialised fields, etc.), and I saw all too well that the two professions are distinct – and that I wasn't cut out for the other one.

I am not a translator. I'm afraid to say I missed that boat – or should I say, I was on it once, but then I disembarked twelve years ago to pursue a career in interpreting, and when I tried to get back on recently, I found the ship had weighed anchor and left the harbour!

As I see it, changes in the translation industry, largely due to globalization and in particular to the advent of CAT tools, **have completely revolutionized the translation landscape in the decade or so that I've been away.** If I were to want to be a full-time professional translator today, I would have to completely retrain in order to do so. I know this, because I have a real live professional translator in my home, so I have first-hand insight into what the job entails these days.

My better half happily spends his days mind-melding with his TMs, his TagEditors, his MultiTerms and whatever that other thing is called, while I just look over his shoulder in wonder. From time to time, he generously offers to initiate me into the wonderful world of Trados, Transit, Across, and all the other interestingly-named tools that today's translators can't live without, but I just shrug sheepishly and wonder how it all happened so fast.

I do still produce the occasional translation from time to time, but they tend to be for customers who are still stuck back in the 20th century like me – the ones who don't demand clean and unclean versions of the file and who seem to agree that “sometime next week” is a reasonable delivery deadline. I enjoy the intellectual rigor required to produce translations, but I can't keep up with the professionals of today.

I am not an interpreting researcher. But how I wish I was! One thing is being able to do the job, and another thing is understanding why and how it gets done. Thanks to the excellent work of interpreting researchers, we are steadily gaining insights into this. **In my next life, I will dedicate myself to research and love every minute of it.** In this life, I will content myself with reading the results of others' investigative pursuits.

I am not a proofreader/editor. Wait a minute – yes, I am! This is actually one side job that I have found to be a perfect complement to working in the booth.

In the booth, **you only get one crack at it** (or as Franz Pöchhacker puts it, you have the opportunity to produce “a first and final rendition in another language ... on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language” [\[1\]](#)). As a result, you often end the day feeling like it wasn't quite right, or that at least if you'd had a second chance, you would have done better (at least, I do).

When I am proofreading or editing texts written by others, on the other hand, I can give myself two, three, or as many cracks at it as I want (I've already said I don't work for customers with tight deadlines). I can reread and rework a text until I think it sounds just right. This is the perfect antidote to that end-of-day, not-quite-good-enough feeling I described above, not to mention **the ideal escape valve for the closet perfectionist in me** (the one I had to suppress in order to survive as a conference interpreter).

What I do do

If you were to ask my six-year-old son what his mommy does for a living, he would probably say that a few times a month, I travel to a different city to go work in a meeting. He'd say **I spend most of the day in a glassed-in booth listening through a headset and talking into a microphone.** He'd say I help people who don't speak the same language talk to each other about stuff. And you know, that pretty much sums it up, really. (If you were to ask my three-year-old daughter what her

mommy does for a living, she would probably say I fly in airplanes and sleep in hotels a lot – also true.)

Of course, I could fill in the details for you, but there are already a number of very good online resources that do precisely that. For example, there are AIIC's articles [A day in the life of an interpreter](#) and [How we work](#), which offer a pretty accurate idea of what we conference interpreters do for a living.

Why and how I do it

So, by this point I have already confessed that I am not very creative or excessively patient. I have also admitted that I am not actively bilingual (don't let my willingness to chitchat in several different languages fool you – I'm no good for interpreting into anything but English!). I am also not very high-tech (again, the BlackBerry, blog, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are just a smokescreen to hide my inner Luddite). **What is left over that makes me a good conference interpreter?**

A good place to start might be my **insatiable curiosity** (the thing that makes me read newspapers back to front and back again, thereby drawing curious stares from fellow travelers in airports). And then there's the fact that **I thrive on stress** and the resulting adrenaline rush (this always comes in handy when the going gets tough in the booth). I also love **new challenges** (although I tend to get bored quickly, so it's a good thing I have to do a different meeting every week). I'm definitely a **team player** (indispensable in the booth, where you are always working with one or more colleagues, but equally valuable in the dog-eat-dog interpreting market, where sticking together is often the only way to survive professionally). Oh, and I am a stickler for **quality and high standards** (ask my interpreting students and they will assure you that I can wax very boring on this particular topic).

Bringing it all back home

This brings me to my take-home message for today. After all the time I have spent talking here about what I am and what I am not, you might think that my message will have something to do with what divides the different language professions. On the contrary: if anything, **I feel that we have to focus on what unites us!** Our different skill sets, aptitudes and specialisations should not be used as a pretext to divide and conquer.

The different groups of language professionals probably have much more in common than we realize: **our love of languages, a passion for what we do, and above all, our commitment to quality and high standards.** Deep down, we must also all be team players, because otherwise we wouldn't have created so many different associations and groupings to defend our profession! The list is virtually endless. A quick check of the blogroll on [Bootheando](#) reveals no less than 36 different translation and interpreting associations – and that's just a selection of what's out there. The objectives of our associations, whatever form they may take, are generally the same: **to promote our profession, to ensure high quality and working standards, and to support each other mutually as professionals.**

But before I start getting all weepy and you have to go digging for the Kleenex again, let me give you that take-home message: this solidarity is not to be taken for granted, nor is it to be neglected. We language professionals have to continue to stick together, and we have to continue to work to achieve our common goals. **Our professional future depends on it.**

Michelle Hof is a conference interpreter and trainer. She is also the author of [The Interpreter Diaries](#), a blog that looks at the life and work of a conference interpreter.

This article was originally written for the website of the [International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters](#) and appears here in a slightly altered form.

[1] Pöchhacker, Franz (2004). *Introducing interpreting studies* (p.11). London and New York: Routledge

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