

# Journal des traducteurs Translators' Journal

## Translating, an ideal profession for women

Henry Fischbach

---

Volume 9, Number 1, 1er Trimestre 1964

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061080ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061080ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (print)

2562-2994 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

Fischbach, H. (1964). Translating, an ideal profession for women. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, 9(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061080ar>

## TRANSLATING, AN IDEAL PROFESSION FOR WOMEN <sup>1</sup>

Henry FISCHBACH,  
*The Language Service, New York*

Translation is one of the few professional careers open to women with an interest and background in languages which need not be sacrificed at the altar of marriage or abandoned for the enchantment of motherhood. Once the necessary proficiency has been acquired, it can be pursued substantially without interference from either man or child. It will offer more rewards — material, intellectual and emotional — than any other pursuit, with the possible exception of the one to which you have been unknowingly dedicating yourselves since nine months before your birth. Because translation is somewhat of an art as well as a science, most women, I find, are particularly well suited for it, thanks to their enviable ability to combine introspection, imagination and reason in the right proportions. The opportunities for a translating career are varied, and the demand for competent practitioners of the craft is constantly growing. This country's increasing awareness of the importance of language as a tool of political and commercial persuasion and as a key to cultural, commercial and scientific rewards has raised the status of the American translator to that of a specialist whose services are viewed in many quarters as essential to national growth and survival.

Let us examine some of these opportunities and what you can do to avail yourselves of them.

---

(1) Texte d'une conférence donnée sous les auspices de Barnard College, N.Y., le 12 décembre 1962. L'auteur, qui prend une part active aux travaux de l'A.T.A., dont il est le vice-président, dirige de sa charmante demeure nichée dans les bois le long du Hudson une importante agence de traduction intitulée *The Language Service*. Il est, depuis de longues années, membre correspondant du *Journal*.

Spécialiste en matière de traduction scientifique et médicale, M. Fischbach nous a déjà donné plusieurs articles, notamment "Translating German, French and Italian Chemical Literature", *J. des Trad.* III.2 (1958) : 78-86.

Sa grande expérience et sa curiosité intellectuelle pour tout ce qui touche à la traduction l'ont particulièrement bien préparé à traiter du sujet. Heureuses les diplômées de Barnard College qui l'écoutaient, et auront pu s'orienter avec clarté vers une profession difficile, mais passionnante, exigeante. Puisque le texte touche, par tant de côtés, aux problèmes de la formation du traducteur, vus évidemment par un Américain et pour les Etats-Unis, nous avons estimé qu'il convenait parfaitement au cadre de nos discussions du 2e congrès. *NLLR*.

## JOURNAL DES TRADUCTEURS — TRANSLATORS' JOURNAL

In addition to the departments of the Government manifestly concerned with foreign affairs in the broadest sense of the word, translators are found in the U.S. Patent Office, the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce and Labor, the various military establishments, the National Research Council, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institutes of Health, and so forth. As for private industry, leading U.S. corporations have assigned them staff positions in the divisions in charge of research and development, exports and imports, foreign advertising and public relations, and legal affairs. Many of the major companies with world-wide interests have in fact established separate resident translation departments staffed by financial, technical, scientific, advertising and legal specialists in the five so-called "common" commercial languages, widely considered to be Spanish, French, German, Portuguese and Italian. In research and Government, of course, Russian is of paramount importance.

An even larger volume of translation in the United States is done on a contract basis by free-lance translators and by the translation agencies which employ or retain them. New York, by far the largest center of free-lance translation activity in the country, has approximately 100 translation agencies, ranging in size from one to half a dozen or more resident translators and subcontracting for the services of perhaps altogether 500-700 self-employed translators working full-time or part-time.

And then there is the United Nations and its many affiliated agencies, which employ a total of some 500 translators, interpreters and language editors, here in New York and in various major cities of the world.

At this point, I might say a few words about interpreting. Job opportunities in interpreting are much more limited than in translation. In fact, it is generally held that there are no more than 200 fully qualified conference interpreters in the world — which, someone has said, makes them only scarcely less rare than whooping cranes. The skills required are of a very special nature and can rarely, if ever, be learned on the job or at a school, at least not in this country. A career in interpreting would also be less appealing to women, it seems to me, because the traveling involved would conflict with the kind of meaningful family life for which women are predestined. There is little sense for most of you to embark upon a career which you will undoubtedly have to interrupt for rather long periods of time, with practically no assurance of ever being able to resume it.

Now, what about the financial rewards of translation ?

The earnings of salaried translators vary considerably, depending on the extent of their specialized knowledge and experience, and on the number of languages they can competently handle. Salaries range from about \$4,000 to \$8,000 a year

In the case of free-lance translators, income is naturally determined by the translator's ability and experience, the number of languages he can translate and the amount of time he devotes to translation work. An experienced, full-time, free-lance translator with a working knowledge of three or four foreign languages, who is also reasonably familiar with two

or three technical subjects (*and who is a competent typist*) can look forward to an average annual income of about \$7,500. If he is particularly gifted, has advanced knowledge in several scientific subjects and can translate from half a dozen languages, he can gross as much as \$12,500 to \$15,000 a year.

But that, I might add, takes some doing.



Exactly what *does* it take? What are the educational requirements and how and where can one obtain the necessary practical training?

First of all, let me tell you that in this country there are no *formal* educational requirements for becoming a professional translator. The profession of translator is not licensed, nor does its practice officially require any degree or specific course of study. Yet you cannot hope to be a translator simply by calling yourself one. Not until others do, will your translating career have begun.

To correct the first and perhaps most widespread misconception most aspiring translators harbor — and I charitably warn you that this is probably not the only illusion about translation I will have to destroy before I am through — it is not enough to have had four years of college French, German or Spanish to obtain a job as translator upon graduation. The only way to become a translator is to do lots and lots and lots of translating. If you will regard everything you have learned in high school and college — literally everything, not just the French, German or Spanish — as important but no more than the foundation upon which to build your professional structure, you will spare yourself much disillusionment and waste little time and still fewer tears in getting down to the actual work of learning your trade. A major in French, German or Spanish is no more a key to a translating job than four years of premedical studies is to a hospital residency.

Before suggesting what I believe to be the best kind of college curriculum for a successful translating career, permit me to digress long enough to say that most of my comments here refer to non-literary translation. Literary translation is not so much a career, as a labor of love. To quote Professor Justin O'Brien, who helped to make my undergraduate years so worthwhile, "one should never translate anything one does not admire." This eminent translator of Gide's *Journals* once told an interviewer: "Sometimes, I feel as though I had written them myself." The prime requisite of a good literary translator is to be a creative writer in one's own right. Since it is more likely that those among you who have this gift will become writers rather than, as one literary translator has bitterly remarked, "enter the world of literature through the service entrance", I shall confine my remarks to the other — more pragmatic — forms of translation. It is a sad comment on the literary market place, but most publishers still believe

that to be a literary translator all one needs is some knowledge of the languages involved. This no doubt accounts for the fact that, as has been pointed out, a writer will earn considerably more for penning a short magazine story than for translating a good long novel.

I cannot therefore, in good conscience, hold out the promise of job opportunities in the field of literary translation, even if you were all born writers. The opportunities are far greater in the field of commercial and scientific translation, where the law of supply and demand will work in your favor, if you are competent.

What then are the requirements for a technical translator, using this term in its broadest sense to include the translation of legal, commercial and scientific material ?

1. He must have a fairly extensive knowledge of, and be able to reason in, the subject matter of the translation.
2. He must be able to read the language he is translating well enough so that he can grasp the author's intended meaning, even if poorly expressed.
3. He must himself be able to embody that meaning in lucid and straight-forward English.



To meet these requirements, a curriculum including as many of the subjects I shall now mention would seem to be the best way for a college student to prepare himself for a career in translating.

¶ First, the courses that will provide a fairly extensive knowledge of, and ability to reason in, the subject matter of the translation. These are three (and preferably four) terms of mathematics, including a basic course in statistics; at least three terms of chemistry, physics *and* biology, as well as one term of business administration and economics; at least two terms of European history plus a specialized course in the history of the country in which the foreign language of your avowed major is spoken; two terms of sociology and psychology and any other science courses you can squeeze in. So much subject matter background.

¶ The second requirement I listed for a technical translator is a sound reading knowledge and grasp of the language from which he is translating. This will require four years of a major foreign language, preferably French or Spanish, since thorough grounding in either of these will later open the door to a reading knowledge — as distinct from a speaking or writing knowledge — of all the other Romance languages with *very little* additional study. Remember that the more languages you can translate, the greater your chances of success as a professional translator and the greater your opportunity to perfect the languages you already know and to acquire a reading knowledge of *still* more languages. This might be called the snow-ball effect of learning languages.

## JOURNAL DES TRADUCTEURS — TRANSLATORS' JOURNAL

If you have decided to take four years of French, also take two years of Spanish; if Spanish is to be your major, then take two years of French as well. For the specific goal of a translating career, I would *not* recommend taking more than two years of the second Romance language because two years is ample for the purpose, since you need only learn the ground rules of the second language. It will soon become apparent why this is all you need.

In addition to these two foreign languages, you should try to take two years of German and two of Russian, unless of course you have decided to major in either of these languages, in which case you will be taking four years. Whether you major in German or Russian, take the other for two years, plus two years of French as well.

Enroll in as many *basic* foreign-language courses as you have time for, avoiding the advanced literature courses. This will be difficult to do in your major, unless you can convince your faculty advisor that it is in your best interest not to take them — admittedly a tall order. The reason for this is obvious. You will simply not have the time to take many advanced literature courses because there is yet another language you would be well advised to study — in fact it is the most important of them all if you are ever going to become proficient and successful at technical translation. And that is *Latin*. Don't wince. My conviction of the value of Latin to the technical translator is based on the most pragmatic kind of considerations, not on any theories of education. Take two years of it, no matter how possibly make. If nothing else, it will do wonders for your English. Those of you who are freshmen and have never had Latin in High School, take a trying the experience may be. It is the best investment in time you can non-credit course in elementary Latin if you must so as to be eligible to take 2 years of College Latin. Remember that for every 10 Latin words you learn, you will have learned 5 to 10 words of French, Spanish, Italian, German *and* English at absolutely *no* extra cost in time of effort. Speaking of educational bargains, Latin is the greatest of them all. In addition to which, you will learn enough grammar to teach yourself the rudiments of several additional languages at some later time.

¶ And, finally, the third requirement for a technical translator: The ability to express himself in lucid and straightforward English. Take two or three English writing courses, including one in newspaper writing and one in technical writing. This is important, for no matter how well you know a given foreign language and how familiar you may be with a particular subject, it is all wasted if you cannot write clear, grammatically controlled English.

At this point I should perhaps reassure you that this four-year curriculum is not an absolute must, but simply a very desirable goal. I should also make quite clear that it will be of little value for a teaching career in languages (or any other subject for that matter), because its purpose is not specialization, but rather what my instructors at Columbia used to call in my freshman year a "broad educational foundation". If only there

were some sanctioned way of obtaining a "broad educational foundation" throughout the entire four years of college (and not only during the first two), one would not have this problem of being compelled to major in something, in a word — to specialize. From where I stand, this is the worst thing you could do.

I wish to express publicly my admiration to your Faculty Committee for its broadmindedness in permitting me to voice such heresies. Also, I shall not abuse their and your hospitality to belabor the point.



Much of what I have said so far will be of interest primarily, if at all, to those of you — freshmen and sophomores — who are still very much concerned with where you are going and what courses to take to get there. The immediate interest of the juniors and seniors among you is of a more practical nature. The question uppermost in your minds is. "How do I go about getting the practical training and experience that will launch me on a translating career?"

There is no specialized school in the United States, such as is found in most European countries and in Canada, which offers a concentrated course of study in translation or interpreting techniques on an undergraduate or even a postgraduate level. Individual courses in technical translation are available at some schools, but none offers a carefully planned curriculum extending over a period of several years and ultimately leading to a degree or certificate of competence. The most ambitious plan I know of covers a series of basic translation courses in French, Spanish, Russian and German, which are being given at the academic level here in New York by — shall we say — another network. It is the hope of the educators at this well-known institution of learning that these courses will some day have sufficient appeal to attract enough registrants for a fullfledged school of translation and interpreting to be established.

From having taught one of these courses last year, I know that the students who take them harbor a number of widely shared illusions about translation. If you will permit another brief digression, I would like to explode some of these myths.

¶ The first is that majoring in a given foreign language enables one to translate almost anything from and into that language with the help of suitable dictionaries. This is definitely not so. Even if suitable dictionaries did exist on most subjects, which is far from being the case, it is axiomatic in the translating profession that one cannot and should not be expected to translate technical, not to mention literary, material into any but one's native tongue.

¶ Then there is the misconception that the translating one has done in college is experience enough for competently translating business letters,

contracts, laws, scientific articles, patents and the myriad other types of material a professional translator must handle. It is not, I have had the opportunity to work with several language majors fresh out of college with a B+ or A average, who were unable to translate correctly and completely even the simplest kind of foreign communication. This is no reflection on either their intellectual or language ability. *Just as the mere possession of a camera does not make a person a photographer, so mere knowledge of a foreign language does not make a translator.* A knowledge of languages is no more than a tool which one must first learn to use if it is to be of any practical value. And the only way one can learn to apply a background in languages, no matter how extensive, to the art of translation, is to translate. One master practitioner of that art has said that no one can really consider himself to be a professional translator until he has translated his first "megalex" — his coinage for a million words.

Another erroneous belief is that a translation can never be as good as the original. This may be true of literary translations, but it is definitely not of technical translations, which are often superior to the original. The reason for this is that in many cases the scientific translator is a better writer than the scientist author.

¶ The last myth I wish to explode is that electronic translating machines, sophisticated as some of them are or promise to become, will soon be replacing the human translator. This view is not shared by the very language people who program these computers and edit their output. One authority on the subject has said, and I quote: "Fully automatic, high-quality translation is unattainable in the near future, and not attainable altogether unless machines can be built and programs for them written which will endow them with quasihuman intelligence, knowledge and knowledgeability." After all, translation is essentially an interpretive and creative function, which no machine can be expected to perform. Some of you may have heard how one machine is reported to have translated "L'esprit est prompt, mais la chair est faible" by "The whiskey is good, but the meat is spoiled." In another case, the editor of a machine translation was rather baffled to find something referred to as "invisible insanity". Checking back on the original, he quickly solved the mystery. "Invisible insanity", you might like to know, is "out of sight, out of mind". You therefore need not fear the competition of the translating machine.



Let us now return to your career and consider how you might go about getting started on it. The most practical and effective course is to do an apprenticeship as a trainee in a translation agency or translation department of a large corporation or bank. It will be very difficult for you to get a job as a translator — even as a translator in training — because of



## JOURNAL DES TRADUCTEURS — TRANSLATORS' JOURNAL

your lack of practical experience. However, if you offer your services as a foreign-language typist, proofreader and/or checker, your chances are far better. Make it clear to your prospective employer that in the beginning you are quite willing to do any job around the office, no matter how unglamorous — such as answering the phone, typing English and foreign translations, proofreading of foreign-language material, checking translations for completeness, billing, filing, terminology research and so on.

This means that you must acquire skill as a touch typist before applying for a job. This is essential. *Remember that typing proficiency is a sine qua non condition for a career as a professional translator* since handwritten work is no longer acceptable to most employers and clients. For the first year or two, your salary will not reflect your investment of time and money in college. Translators do not begin to earn money on any scale until they have become fairly proficient at their work and know their way around in a variety of subjects. This takes time and practical experience on the job. But those of you who are in a position to make such an apprenticeship will find the material rewards well worth your while and commensurate with your ability. How long you remain an apprentice and later a journeyman will, of course, depend entirely on you.

All this is not pure theory or wishful thinking. It is based on the actual experience I and others have had with translator trainees. In the case of our organization, The Language Service, we have employed three such trainees in the past six or seven years — all of them language majors who came to us straight from college. One, in fact, is a graduate from Barnard. Today, all three are competent professional translators working at home and doing very well.

In closing, let me assure you that the promotional opportunities for a woman are excellent in this field. Your sex is no deterrent whatsoever to advancement if you choose to remain a resident salaried translator or to greater earning power if you decide to work on a freelance basis.

Forgive me for having taken so much time for this presentation. It is not always easy to decide how long an article of lecture should be. In this instance, I have followed the counsel with which most of you are no doubt familiar, namely that a talk should be like a girl's skirt : long enough to cover the subject and short enough to be interesting.

I hope I have succeeded on both counts. Thank you.

