

The word on the street

Translators need a deep understanding of their source languages to do their job. But do they need to speak them fluently too? Dina Leifer investigates



Dina Leifer translates from French and Italian to English, specialising in literary, marketing and editorial texts. Her first book translation, *Progress or Freedom*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. Her translation 'Journey at Dusk', a short story for young people, was published in the anthology *Odyssey* by Alma in 2017. Dina began translating professionally after completing her MA in Translating Popular Culture at City, University of London, in 2015. She previously worked as a journalist, editor and content writer. She has a BA (Hons) in French and Italian from Manchester University.

Unlike our interpreter colleagues, translators can be reluctant speakers. Some of us prefer to stay hidden behind our laptops, polishing our texts until they sparkle and avoiding having to converse in our source languages unless it's absolutely necessary.

I have felt this way since I began translating professionally in 2015. I speak decent French, but I don't speak it as well as I would like, which means I can be reticent, especially if I get self-conscious. My spoken Italian is rusty – I barely use it professionally. But I understand both languages well, and I am confident in my ability to translate from them. I decided to speak to some translator colleagues, to find out what they thought.

Not always 100 per cent

Literary translator Vineet Lal is a confident speaker of his source language, French. 'My speaking is extremely fluent,' he says, 'but not on the same level as my understanding of written text. If my understanding of written text is 100 per cent, or near as dammit, my spoken French is around 75 to 80 per cent.' While he doesn't think it is always necessary to be a fluent, confident speaker in order to be a good translator, he does believe it is very useful. 'It helps with dialogue and knowing the rhythm of your language. I'm surprised that many great translators don't really speak the source language,' he says.

European Commission translator Paul Kaye says his speaking ability 'lags well behind my understanding and ability to translate' in all of his source languages. 'I suspect I'm like many translators,' he says, 'in that

I am much more comfortable listening, reading, observing, trying to understand than I am speaking.' Paul is most confident speaking French and Slovak, having lived in Belgium and Slovakia for extended periods. But he also translates from Polish, Hungarian and Estonian. 'I'm very much less confident speaking these languages. I learned them much later in life, and though I visit the countries regularly, I've never lived in them,' he says.

Literary and creative translator from Spanish and French Charlotte Coombe says her ability to speak her languages is 'way lower' than

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her ability to understand and translate. Charlotte lived in Morocco for three years at one point but she has spent a lot less time in her source language countries in the past decade. 'I never really speak French or Spanish day to day. I just stay at home and translate! It's not that I don't like speaking my languages, but I can find it hard to express myself. If I was living in my source country, I'd be a lot more confident.'

Charlotte is happy to write to authors and clients in her source languages but finds speaking in a professional context stressful. 'People

outside the language industry will say "oh, you're a translator; you can speak to so-and-so". But we're not interpreters; we're not out there speaking all the time. It's a completely different skill set.'

Some more than others

Nick Rosenthal is comfortable speaking his main source languages of French and German. Nick is an experienced commercial translator who is also moving into literary translation. He is often taken for a native speaker during his regular trips to his source language countries. 'My French is more than passable – I'm frequently asked if I'm Belgian – and my German is also convincing,' he says. He believes being a fluent speaker is an important skill for translators, and one which we should work on. However, he admits that he lacks confidence in speaking Dutch – which he acquired later than the other two languages – despite being able to translate well from it.

Like Nick, Josephina Worrall feels differently about speaking her different source languages – in her case French and Russian. 'Although my ability to understand and translate written French is better than my ability to speak it, as I feel that is a harder skill, I do feel very confident speaking and writing in French and routinely speak to clients in French,' she says. However, Josephina feels her spoken Russian is 'poor due to lack of use' and says she would not be comfortable speaking to a client in Russian. 'I think of it as a "passive" language for me,' she says.

Ayça Türkoğlu, who translates creative and literary texts from German and Turkish, also feels differently about speaking her different languages. 'I have different relationships with my languages, and it's been that way since I started learning them,' she says. Despite her Turkish background, Ayça first learned Turkish at university. 'I've always read a lot more in German and translated more from German but I've spoken it little,

so my speaking is rusty. My spoken Turkish is very fluent and conversational, but I read and translate it less frequently, so I find I'm a slower reader and translator from Turkish.' She also feels that the nature of each language has a bearing on this. 'I find written and spoken German very similar, while written Turkish is a world away from spoken Turkish. It makes speaking and translating feel all the more like very separate skills.'

Learning and writing

In any case, how much does this actually matter? Translation academic Karen Seago says she finds the anxiety about spoken language skills among some UK translators 'interesting'. Karen recently retired as programme director of the MA in Literary and Audiovisual Translation at City, University of London. She still carries out translation research and supervises PhD students. 'In my mind speaking and translating are very clearly separated,' she says. 'I don't think you need to be a good speaker to be a good translator, because they're quite different areas of competence. Speaking is not something you do as a translator. If you were interpreting you would have to, but that is a completely different skill set. Translation is about nuance. It conveys not only the "what" but also the "how" as well.'

Karen adds that while translators can theoretically work perfectly well without being great speakers of their source languages, they still need to know how the language sounds. 'You need to be able to "hear" the source text, to capture the musical elements of it: cadence, rhythm, tone of voice and so on. You might need to read it aloud to get a sense of the sound and tone of it,' she says.

Ayça takes this further: 'With literary translation, so much of the task is creating a credible voice in English, and that is as much about reading a lot in English. Of course, the necessary sensitivity to the source language is only going to come with familiarity, so it's not as if speaking isn't important, but some of that sensitivity can be developed in other ways, I think. I'm not convinced a good literary translator necessarily makes a good speaker, or vice versa. Good speaking skills are

often held up as proof of ongoing professional development, but, frankly, I'm not even a fluent, confident speaker of my first language, English! Speaking and translating simply don't sit together in my brain.'

Paul agrees: 'You absolutely don't need to be a good speaker of a language to be able to translate well from it; you need above all to be a close observer, reader, listener... I see them as functionally separate. Being immersed in a language culture by living in the country will accelerate your learning and understanding, and it often means that speaking improves at the same rate, but that needn't be the case; you can develop all the understanding of nuance and cultural reference without ending up speaking so well.'

On the other hand, Josephina adds another reason why it's useful

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to be a good speaker – it can be key in forming relationships with commercial clients. 'I know many translators who are excellent at their job and who have a more passive knowledge of their source language. I do, however, think that can hold you back in your business, as it's important to be able to speak to your clients in their own language.'

Keeping a balance

Another interesting issue is that being immersed in your source language culture for long periods can have its drawbacks. It can start to erode your creative command of your target language, which is another essential skill for a translator. Karen has found this with her first language, German.

'I use my German for informal chatting with family and friends, but it can be difficult to express myself, because I find the English keeps

overlying the German,' she says. 'I left Germany over 30 years ago, before it was a united country. Since then there have been a lot of linguistic changes.'

While the translators I spoke to all have different levels of confidence in speaking their source languages, they all agree with Karen that listening to, understanding and reading our source languages are more crucial skills for our profession than speaking them. But could there also be another reason why some UK translators are reluctant speakers? Does being a native English speaker make it harder to practise speaking source languages?

'When everyone can converse in English, speaking a different language can feel awkward for both sides in a conversation,' Paul says. 'When I switch out of English with people, I sometimes sense that they see it as a slight on their ability to communicate in the language of the global educated class, and they react by retrenching in English. With less commonly studied and spoken languages in particular, I find their speakers sometimes cannot understand why outsiders would want to speak their language if communication in English is possible.' However, he says he's found that polite persistence usually pays off.

Ayça has also experienced this. 'I think it has become harder to achieve the distance from English required to really immerse yourself in a language,' she says. For Nick, native English speakers are 'a bit spoilt' because English is so widely spoken. He gives the example of when he and an Irish colleague gave a presentation to a gathering of the French translators' organisation the Société Française des Traducteurs. 'They were amazed when we started speaking in French. We just thought: We're here in France; it's the common language; we should do it in French,' he says.

But Josephina suggests another cause for our reticence: perfectionism. 'I do think that as translators we seek a kind of perfection that is difficult to attain, and so consequently often lack confidence speaking our source language, as we are overly aware of any mistakes,' she concludes. 