Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A.
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ANDREA HOFMANN-MILLER

Andrea Hofmann-Miller studied political economics with the goal of working as a statistician but then decided to add an M.A. in translation and interpretation to her economics degree from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. She “has not regretted it one day. I knew then that statistics is not my future, and that I wanted to be a translator and interpreter.” After graduation, she worked for the U.S. State Department and the German Parliament, “travelled and learned a lot.” She has interpreted for numerous high-profile individuals and has served as an official interpreter at the Olympics since 1996. She is an Associate Professor and Program Head of German Translation and Interpretation at the Monterey Institute where she has been teaching since 1994.

How did you find yourself working in political bodies like the State Department and the Bundestag?

If you want to work for any government organization, you have to take a test. After passing the test, you will be part of the roster of that particular organization, and they call on you if there is a need for your particular language combination.

What kind of work do you do there?

I work as a freelance interpreter.

How is political/official state translation work different from other kinds of translation, like technical or legal fields?

First thing to clarify is that I work for them as an interpreter (spoken word), NOT a translator (written word). Any political interpretation assignments require absolute discretion and confidentiality, but so does legal work. In general, not too much difference, but political interpretation requires a lot of background knowledge about the person/country/role of that person.

I’d like to know more about your research on the influence of English on German. How did you get interested in this?

I have been teaching translation and interpretation since 1994 and have noticed a big difference in the use of the German language. In the beginning, I insisted on the German word instead of using words, such as “Sale” instead of “Schlussverkauf or Angebot”, but learned through my research that those English words have even

reached remote villages in Bavaria. This is a vast research field because our language changes daily and is now very much influenced by social media as well.

1. **How strongly does English influence German?**
2. **How are linguistic and cultural influences related?**

Ad 1) The modern German language is very much influenced by the English language. Anglicisms have always been part of the German language, but in the past, it was mostly English nouns. With the popularity of social media, which is widely used among younger generations, English verbs have become common place in the German language as well and are being conjugated like German verbs (downloaden, downgeloaded or briefen, gebrieft, etc.). Also, titles, such as CEO, COO, Facility Manager, Project Manager are commonly found these days.

Ad 2) I think they are closely related. When I came to the U.S. in the late 1980s, you could clearly differentiate a German from an American just by looking at the clothes. These differences no longer exist. And, whilst I have seen Germany become more American, the same can be said for (at least) Northern California. Americans here are more going back to their French, Italian, German, … roots. These trends influence the language we use very much. German youth prefers English words because that's what they read on Twitter, SnapChat, etc. and see in movies. The cultural differences are not as clear anymore as they were only 10 years ago.

What does your neurolinguistics research involve?

Unfortunately, I have not come very far in that area. I was in cancer treatment from 2014 – 2015 and never really got back to that research. If you are interested in pursuing something like that. Barbara Moser-Mercer from Geneva has done wonderful research in neurolinguistics and interpretation.

Is simultaneous interpretation as hard as it seems?

Definitely. Not everyone can do it. It requires multitasking skills, excellent preparation and a near-native knowledge of all working languages. I have many students who can interpret consecutively but who cannot interpret simultaneously.

What proportion of your work is interpretation versus translation? What do you think are the biggest differences between the two?

About 50/50. Well, first of all translation is the written word, interpretation is the spoken word. Translation requires more faithfulness to the original, whereas in interpretation, you hear, understand and render in your own words. That does not mean you may add or leave out anything, but you have more flexibility as to the word choice.

Your biography mentions your work localizing before 'localization' existed. How have you seen translation and interpretation change, academically and professionally, over your career?

Well, when I translated MS DOS for Microsoft (you might not remember what that is), I was actually localizing because there are character restrictions for software, and you have to consider cultural differences (although these are not so clear anymore today). The translation industry today is heavily influenced by AI and many translators have turned into post-editors for machine translation. There is not so much creativity involved anymore. Interpretation has changed a lot this year due to Covid. We all work with RSI (remote simultaneous interpretation) platforms from our desk. The art of translating/interpreting will never change, but I think the way it is being delivered has changed. Just as an example: I typed my first translation on a typewriter and then made copies at Kinko's before mailing it to my client. Next, I had a 320 baud modem which took about 3 hours to transfer a 10-page WordPerfect document. So, the transfer speed is one way the translation industry has changed for the better. AI is good and bad. If you use Google translate, you must remember that it follows the "if-then" pattern and does not recognize context. Tools, such as Trados Studio, MemoQ, etc. help with terminology management, etc. In interpretation, nothing really has changed. The booths have better technology and soundproofing, but other than that, nothing has changed.

This interview was conducted by Eoin Wilson-Manion.