

There is indeed Colombian talent: translators and interpreters to the stage

Five researchers from Icontec's Technical Committee 218 conducted a characterization of the professional translators and interpreters in Colombia. Their study explores the profiles of these professionals and the lack of status for their work.

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I Do you know the difference between a translator and an interpreter? A translator takes a written text in one language and translates it into another; an interpreter, on the other hand, receives an oral text or signs in a continuous or simultaneous way and translates it into another language too. Both professionals remain hidden behind the curtain of authorship, whereas their work needs more social and economic recognition.

The fact is that they have played essential roles throughout history. For example, they have invented alphabets (**both the Armenian and Georgian alphabets were invented while translating the Bible**) to translate texts from one language to another. They promoted the development and evolution of knowledge in addition to being the players of power, even when this meant penalties, condemnation, or repudiation. Their role has been crucial in the process of secularization of humankind, which began with the translation of the “sacred

scriptures” into different languages. Their value and contributions are countless as they are growing in an interconnected world.

However, very little is known about them in Colombia, and it is very common to turn to international agencies for translation services. **Icontec's Technical Committee 218 (Language and Terminology Committee)** has put the spotlight on the work and image of these professionals. Its mission is not to conduct research but to consider the adaptation of translation standards in the country.

But who is covered by these standards? Five experts from the committee, including translators, interpreters, terminologists, and professors, and representatives of companies and an association—decided in 2017 to develop a method for the characterization of the professionals within this discipline in Colombia to recognize them and establish strategies to allow them to be more competitive at a national and international level.



Camilo Sarmiento Jaramillo, professor at the School of Human Sciences at Universidad del Rosario, is part of the committee and one of the authors of the research, *Hacia una caracterización de los traductores e intérpretes en Colombia* (Towards a characterization of translators and interpreters in Colombia). “The beauty of this exercise is that it stems from a standard that we are all translating together and, as a result of a need from the current local context, we decided to conduct a study,” he recalls.

Similarly, the leader of this research, Professor John Jairo Giraldo Ortiz, from Universidad de Antioquia, states, “**there were some preliminary studies by other colleagues**, but they were quite old and we were interested in exploring them to see whether we were still in the same situation or the profession had evolved.”

A research study with several participants and researchers

For this purpose and after reviewing existing material, they established a survey with closed and open questions to collect information about the active professionals affiliated with universities, companies, and associations. Ninety-eight interpreters and translators in the country accepted the invitation during November 2017 via email and answered the 41-question form.

The researchers then began the quantitative and qualitative analyses based on the answers provided by the participants. They “weighted and discussed the data and established the basic attributes of the profile of the translator in Colombia,” they state.

The subsequent challenge was to write an article with ten authors (initially they were fourteen). “It was a very difficult and exhausting task,” says Professor John Jairo, who led this arduous process and rigorously articulated the diverse views, voices, and styles of the researchers. “He even had to *coach* others. The demands were very high. Some of us were getting desperate and were ready to give up, but for the sake of everyone, the article was finally ready,” Sarmiento explains.

After eight drafts, months of work, and peer reviews, the manuscript was approved by a special national journal and was classified as A2. It was published at the end of 2020. Along with Professors Sarmiento and Giraldo, the study was published by researchers Sandra Bibiana Clavijo Olmos, associate professor at Universidad EAN; Constanza Malavert Chávez, translator at Icontec; and Bibiana Salazar Giraldo, translator and project manager at Decoding TSL in Colombia.



There is a clear predominance of females, which accounted for **68%** of the interpreters and translators surveyed, “a sociodemographic trait that is in consonance with the situation in other countries, such as Spain and Mexico **(61.7% and 54.1%, respectively).**”

In Bogota and the rest of the country, the percentage of women ranges between **76%** and **78%**, whereas in Medellín the gender gap is more balanced, with **55%** of women and **45%** of men.

Who are they?

The research study reveals that **91% of the translators and interpreters who participated were Colombian**, whereas some of them report having additional or exclusive nationality from other countries, such as the United States, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Spain, France, Italy, Mexico, and Switzerland. Similarly, the majority of these practicing professionals (57%) are millennials or young adults under 40, with their professional experience ranging from 4 months to 10 years. They are located particularly in the cities of Bogota and Medellín (83%).

“The market is concentrated in the two most populated cities in the country (Bogota and Medellín), implying that other large urban and economic centers, such as Cali, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Bucaramanga, and Pereira, could develop a competition in the area,” the researchers state. The lack of translation services in several remote areas of the country forces the residents to hire services based in the capital cities of Cundinamarca and Antioquia, which implies a cost overrun, particularly in interpretation services. “Virtuality—an adventure we are currently engaged in—can help bring the service to some regions of the country and reduce costs,” they add.

Lack of training and partnership

In terms of education, 38% have an undergraduate degree in translation (none in interpreting), 32% have no degrees, and the remaining 30% have postgraduate degrees. Other partici-

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pants claim to have degrees in different areas, such as modern languages, social sciences, engineering, law, and political sciences. One third of the total said they undergo complementary training at least once a year.

In the past, people who spoke other languages did this work. Currently, there are four academic training programs in translation: an undergraduate degree at the Universidad de Antioquia, a specialization at the Universidad del Rosario, and two master’s degrees: at the Universidad de Antioquia and the Universidad Autónoma de Manizales.

“**There is a scarcity of academic programs in translation and no programs at all in the field of Interpretation,**” says Professor Sarmiento. He adds that before the pandemic, Universidad del Rosario offered one training course per year related to interpretation. It is expected to reactivate the course virtually and even introduce some specialization or master’s degree in this area.

In line with the scarce academic programs, the lack of cooperative association (only 31%) explains the lack of knowledge of the standards governing and benefiting the profession because only about 15% of the surveyed professionals were aware of them. According to the experts, when the research was conducted only two associations were present: the Colombian Association of Translators, Terminologists, and Interpreters (ACTTI) and the Colombian Association of Translators (CTT).

The lack of cooperative association also increases the risk of violation of their rights and the risk of their work being undervalued. For example, 47% and 11% of those surveyed have translation and interpretation as their main activity, respectively; most of these (91%) work as freelancers, which implies informal and unstable contracts, often with unregulated rates. “We have to educate people that this service is normal and dignified like any other profession,” says Giraldo.

Who hires them? According to the study, 91% of the clients of these professionals are local, whereas only 9% come from other countries based on market demand in areas such as official and technical–scientific translation in medicine, law, education, engineering, technology, economics, and finance.

Call to action

“In conducting this study, our purpose was to awaken the interest of the community in this sector, so that the weaknesses identified can be turned into opportunities for improvement,” the researchers conclude. Their call is crucial for increasing the formative and associative capacity of a group of professionals who require more knowledge, greater unification, and better protection of their labor rights.

Professor Giraldo of the Universidad de Antioquia stresses on the need to consolidate this young profession because the undergraduate programs date back to the end of the 20th century. “The role we have in the academia is crucial to educate and equip our students with tools so that they can practice in a respectable manner, help educate the client and make the profession more visible,” he explains.

The aim for these professionals is to lift the curtain hiding them and become recognizable by the society and law. “We are trying to ensure that this research has an impact on improving the conditions of the professionals in translation and interpretation,” says Sarmiento Jaramillo, from Universidad del Rosario. He adds that the academic programs can continue expanding, but they also require a commitment and recognition from the state.

The fact is that Colombia has not yet enacted a law that completely recognizes the professional work of translators and interpreters, except for **Decrees 382 and 2257 of 1951**, which have been governing the role and practice of the official interpreter for 70 years, but they have not been renewed. There is an urgent need to modernize the rules related to this profession for protecting the professionals under a curtain of dignity and recognition. ■