

## How to improve your language skills

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Interpreters need a large vocabulary, and need to be able to access this vocabulary quickly. Daniel Gile's Gravitational Model of linguistic availability <http://interpreters.free.fr/language/gilelanguage.htm> is a good graphic representation of what we're up against: imagine a solar system where the sun is your permanent vocabulary, the words (by words I mean words and the knowledge of how to use them) that you will never forget. The planets that orbit closest to the sun are words that you don't use every day but can recall easily, your active vocabulary. A bit farther out are the words that you know, but can only remember when you hear or see them; these are your passive vocabulary. Beyond this, in outer space, figuratively, are the words you either forgot or never learned. Every time you read, write, say, or hear a word it moves closer to the sun. If you never or rarely use a word, it'll never come any closer; if you stop using a word, it starts moving away from the sun, and sooner or later it leaves orbit and you forget it. This last part happens often to people who grow up speaking a language and then stop speaking it often or fully enough. If this is your situation, don't feel bad, because it is happening to everyone, bilingual or not, all the time.

To combat this centrifugal tendency, interpreters (and anyone else who wants to improve/retain language skills) need to read, write, listen to and speak both their languages constantly. In doing this, we need to make sure that we expose ourselves to a variety of materials, in both high and low registers (formal and informal language). Interpreters have to be ready to interpret for people with all sorts of backgrounds and to preserve the register of that person's speech – if you're interpreting for a college professor, you can't make her sound like a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade dropout, and vice-versa.

Be aware of what value you can get from your sources. For instance, the local Brazilian-community newspapers are useful for getting an idea of what is going on around here, and to learn/recall slang terms and idiomatic expressions, but the writing is full of spelling and grammar mistakes, and the articles about court cases usually have incorrect information and vocabulary. There is a lot of material online but again, be aware that quality is variable; even well-known organizations have material on their websites that is incorrectly translated. It can be interesting, though, to compare these hasty translations to other sources.

Magazines are good. In English, try *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *National Geographic*. In Portuguese, *Veja*, *IstoÉ*, *Exame*.

When I was learning Cape Verdean Creole, I took a class, read everything I could find in Kriolu, and listened to Cape Verdean songs. I put up flyers in Cape Verdean neighborhoods, looking for people who would be willing to meet with me so I could practice. I made some friends and learned quite a bit this way.

Get in the habit of writing in both your languages. Writing is a more deliberate way of communicating than speech; you'll have to spend more time with the language, trying to figure out how to express your ideas clearly. You'll be forced to think about and

research issues that would get glossed over and forgotten in conversation. Find people who are willing and able to correct what you write, and treat them well; they will be helpful for as long as you work with languages. It's also a good idea to put aside what you write and then read it over later. Don't leave corrections up to your computer, because your computer doesn't know or care about what you're trying to say.

Another good idea is to write down new words and phrases that you hear or read. Learn how to use them, what register they are in, and how to translate them. Put all your new words together in a glossary. Put them in alphabetical order. Put your translations of these terms in alphabetical order, and cross-reference them. List your sources. Create subcategories (slang, technical terms, idioms, etc.) Remember, the more time you spend with your words, the easier it will be to recall them when needed.

Books; before the advent of video games and iPods, these were fairly popular. They will do wonders for your language skills. Yes, detective novels can increase your legal vocabulary, and self-help books can help you, well, help yourself, I guess, but the best thing to do is to read literature in both languages. Being exposed to the skillful use of language is an invaluable experience for an interpreter (before you start whining, the Boston Public Library has books in Portuguese). Some recommendations; João Ubaldo Ribeiro, Clarice Lispector, Rubem Braga, Mário de Andrade, Vinícius de Moraes, João Pessoa, José Saramago. In English; Jane Austen, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Bruce Chatwin, Kurt Vonnegut, Julian Barnes, e.e. cummings, W.H. Auden.

One of the marks of a good interpreter is being able to pay attention. It seems obvious, but being a poor listener/reader or not being able to focus under stress are serious and common faults. Interpreters need to find a way to be interested in whatever they are hearing, to figure out what is going on, what is important, and to retain all the details. Take a good look at how you listen/read. Can you concentrate on things that are not personally relevant or interesting to you? If not, think about whether you can learn to do this.