

## Translation



The six translation services of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management are responsible for producing parliamentary documentation in the six official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, as well as correspondence, publications and other documents to support meetings\*. There is also a small German Translation Section in New York, funded by the German-speaking Member States. Translation is just one step in the documentation process; the others are editing and editorial and desktop publishing.

Translation at the United Nations is particularly challenging for a number of reasons. Translators must achieve the highest quality standards in terms of accuracy, readability and the use of correct terminology, while also meeting workload standards and translation deadlines to ensure timely delivery. The documents translated cover a broad range of technical, political, scientific, social, economic and legal matters, from peace and security to statistics, the law of the sea, economic development and the right to food. They also vary considerably in type, from 60,000-word reports to 1-page diplomatic notes. In addition, given the crucial role that multilingual documentation plays in supporting multilateralism and the deliberations of the Member States, the processing deadlines are invariably tight. The workload can also be highly unpredictable, with new additions to the agenda generating unexpected documentation for processing or international crises generating sudden rushes of urgent jobs. Another challenge is the need for translators to write in a neutral variant of their language:

translators in the French Translation Service, for example, aim to draft their translations in a style of French that will be readily understood by all French-speaking nations. Like all parliamentary documentation, United Nations documents often form part of a series that makes consistent terminology use essential in many cases. United Nations translators are greatly assisted in this regard by the automated reference-checking and term-matching features of the technological tools they use, which include multilingual terminology databases and translation memories (see more in [Innovation](#)).

\*Translation at the United Nations refers to the translation of the written word, that is, the translation of written texts from one language to another. The translation of the spoken word, whether simultaneously or consecutively, is referred to as “interpretation”.

## **Role of translators**

The translations that United Nations translators produce not only facilitate the work of the Organization, they document its activities and thus play a crucial informational and archival role.

In addition to translating texts, language staff in the translation services also edit documents written in their language to ensure they are clear, coherent and factually accurate before their translation into the other languages (see more in [Editing](#)). Members of the English Translation and Editorial Service also produce the official summary records of proceedings of certain meeting bodies (see [Précis-writing](#)).

Another key responsibility of translators is the standardization of terms in the six official languages. All translation services contribute to the development of official United Nations terminology and the multilingual database UTERM, which is available to the public [here](#).

## **Working methods**

Translation at the United Nations is an intense, high-tech activity. United Nations translators work in a fully electronic environment and leverage state-of-the-art technological tools, such as eLUNa, the in-house computer-assisted translation tool (see [gText](#)), bitext alignment tools, the United Nations terminology database (UNTERM) and document repositories, such as the Official Document System (ODS). These tools help to ensure the consistency and accuracy of their translations. They also use online dictionaries, glossaries and other in-house databases, supplemented by research when needed, or consultations with fellow translators/précis-writers and relevant experts. Translation per se remains a highly intellectual activity. United Nations translators need to grasp the deepest levels of meaning of the documents they translate in order to accurately convey all the nuances in the other language. Translating the

sometimes deliberately obscure or ambiguous wording of diplomatic communications similarly calls for superior linguistic and analytical skills. For more information on the skills required, see [United Nations Careers](#).

United Nations translators work as a team, sharing assignments and knowledge, consulting one another often and working together to solve any translation or terminology issues that may arise. Translators and editors systematically gather new or outdated terms, and research and verify them against authoritative sources, in consultation with in-house specialists from substantive departments, language professionals and outside sources, including technical experts and specialized websites. Verified terms are then stored in the multilingual database **UNTERM**, which is also directly accessible through the eLUNa translation tool.

## **Skills required**

United Nations translators are required to have a perfect command of their main language and an excellent knowledge of, in most cases, two other official languages. They must also be able to write in a clear and perfectly grammatical style in their main language. The goal is to produce documents that are readily comprehensible to all into whose hands they fall, bearing in mind that many readers of United Nations documents, in particular the representatives of the Member States, will be working in a language other than their own. Translators need to be adept at carrying out research, using both United Nations and outside sources, and must remain abreast of developments in the subjects dealt with by the United Nations. Translators are expected to acquire substantive knowledge in the many fields of United Nations activity, in particular peace and security, development, human rights, budgeting, international law and climate change. Intellectual curiosity and a willingness to master new subjects, in addition to superior linguistic skills, are therefore a must. Though demanding, the work also affords United Nations translators a unique opportunity to gain insight into world affairs and international diplomacy, to work on varied and high-profile texts and to become experts in specific subject areas.

To meet the quality standards expected of United Nations documents, translators must:

- Thoroughly understand the subject and nature of the document they are translating and be aware of any political nuances
- Ensure the accuracy and completeness of their translations in conveying both the meaning and tone of the original
- Ensure consistency within series of documents by checking official terminology, specialized terms or phrasing, and references
- Adhere to the style and usage rules of their translation service