Language markets: Turkish

Let’s take a look at the supply and demand for conference interpreters with Turkish in their repertoire.

Bahar COTUR.
Published: March 21, 2014 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Interpreters with active and/or passive Turkish work predominantly as freelancers. We estimate that currently (2014) 70-75% of their work is for private sector clients (companies, NGOs, etc.) and the remaining 25-30% from the public sector (most of that from the national government in Ankara). International institutions, mainly the EU, account for no more than 5% of the market.

Turkish<>English is by far the most in demand language pair, used in upwards of 90% of meetings in which Turkish is spoken. Interpreting is usually done from a bilingual booth. Arabic, Russian, French, German, Italian and Spanish follow. Demand for Arabic and Russian has been rising rapidly and incipient demand for Chinese is being noted. The number of multilingual meetings with Turkish has decreased in recent years.

The conference interpreting market in Turkey

Although no official market study has been carried out in Turkey or for Turkish in general, various surveys conducted by two professional organizations of conference interpreters with some overlap in membership (TKTD, a national association with some 120 members and AIIC Turkey with around 40) allow for estimates.

The average number of working days of association members is 120 days/year. The number of practicing interpreters in Turkey not belonging to either professional association is estimated to be roughly equal to the number who do. If one puts the total number of interpreters at 200 and assumes that each works between 100 – 120 days per year, the overall market in Turkey would represent 20,000 – 24,000 interpreter days/year (all language combinations included). About 85% of this work is done in simultaneous mode.

The market elsewhere

Demand for conference interpreting to and from Turkish is weak in the rest of the world, with only 5% of the work reported as being done outside of Turkey. Demand for court and community interpreting, however, is more robust, especially in European countries with a sizable number of immigrants of Turkish origin.

Private companies and public institutions in Turkey tend to recruit in-country and take interpreters along for meetings or visits abroad. However, major Turkish companies operating in the Middle East and Central Asia (mainly in the construction sector) tend to recruit interpreters in situ, usually for community or legal interpreting needs.
International organizations and the role of Turkish

Turkey is a member of many international organizations including the UN, OECD, OSCE, WTO, NATO, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). It is also a founding member of the Council of Europe, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Developing-8 (D-8).

Turkish, however, is an official language of only one: the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC), whose secretariat is in Istanbul. Organizations such as BSEC, D-8, OIC and ECO sometimes hold meetings in which Turkish is used, in which case the relevant Turkish ministry or agency recruits on the Turkish market.

The EU institutions constitute a separate category. As accession talks evolve (they started in October 2005), so will demand for Turkish. Currently there are 35 EU-accredited conference interpreters in Turkey.

For interpreters with active Turkish, the European Commission reported 166, 213 and 74 interpreter days for 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively, and the European Parliament 97, 113 and 114.

Turkish as a bridge to other Turkic languages

There is considerable mutual intelligibility between Turkish and other Oghuz languages, including Azerbaijani and Turkmen, the other two most widely spoken Oghuz languages. The characteristic features of Turkish such as vowel harmony, agglutination, and lack of grammatical gender are universal within the Turkic family and the Altaic languages. But due to great differences in vocabulary, simultaneous or consecutive interpretation between Turkish and one of these related languages is not possible without sound training and experience. Still, once Turkish is acquired, adding one of these languages would be relatively easier than adding an unrelated one.

Currently, the number of working days between languages of this group is close to zero. When representatives of these countries are present at a meeting, Russian is often used as the pivot language for relay.

Turkish in AIIC

AIIC Turkey was born in 2006 when the minimum requirement of 25 members was reached. Today the region hosts 35 members. As of January 2014, there were 41 AIIC members with Turkish (Turkish being an active language for 38 of them and a passive one for 3), 8 of whom live outside of Turkey. All are freelancers.

Quick facts

- Turkish is spoken by over 85 million people (75 m in Turkey).
- It belongs to the Oghuz group of languages, a subgroup of the Turkic languages.
- Its cultural references are Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, North African and Caucasian.
- Islam, the main religion of Turkey, has had considerable influence on the language.
- Linguistic features of interest to interpreters include agglutination, lack of grammatical gender, and basic subject-object-verb word order, with the verb supplying information on tense, negation, modality, person, etc.

More on the AIIC website

From dragomans to interpreters: A brief overview of the profession in Turkey


[3] Other countries where Turkish is spoken include the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkish is also spoken by several million people of immigrant origin in Western Europe, particularly in Germany, but also in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Austria, UK, Sweden and Switzerland, and in Australia and the USA.

Recommended citation format: