



Freelance tariffs in South Africa

Background

The question of how much a client should be paying for language services is always a thorny one. The language practitioner is offering a specialised service and deserves to make a decent living; the client has the right not to be exploited and to pay a fair tariff.

The Institute is often approached with a request for “recommended” or “guideline” or “set” rates. We are unfortunately not in a position to provide these. By law, recommended fees can be set only for professions governed by a statutory body. This is why there are such fees for doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers, although even there they are not set in stone. SATI is not a statutory body and the law therefore states specifically that we **may not recommend** or give guideline rates. The profession operates purely on free market principles, and as a result the rates charged can vary widely, governed by a variety of factors.

What the Institute is in a position to do, however, is to make available the results of regular surveys among its members, which reflect the actual position in the marketplace. The surveys show the type of variation that occurs in the market, but also the average and median rates charged.

What should language practitioners be charging and clients be paying?

It is important to bear in mind that language practitioners offer a specialised service and should be remunerated accordingly. Consider what you are prepared to pay a plumber, a computer technician or your GP. Just because you are able to speak a language but know nothing about plumbing, the insides of your PC or medicine does not mean that language services are worth less than other services.

It is generally accepted that a competent, experienced translator, working in a language combination and field she/he is reasonably familiar with, should be producing around 1,5 pages (about 450 words) of final translation per hour or 10 to 12 pages per day – this includes any necessary research, terminological verification, editing and proofreading. One way of determining a fair tariff for your area would thus be to take the average hourly rate charged for other, similar services and divide that by 450 to obtain a rate per word of translation. Working on the basis of a rate of say R300 an hour, this gives a translation rate of 65c per word, or R65 per 100 words (depending on which method of quoting you prefer). This should then apply to the most readily available services, which in South Africa would be translation between English and Afrikaans. As the services become more specialised, so the price will increase. Thus translation into and from the major European languages, where a relatively large pool of translators is available, although not as many as for English/Afrikaans, would be charged at a slightly higher rate, while translators in scarce languages like Japanese, Serbian or Arabic would charge a proportionately higher rate, depending on how difficult it is to find a translator in the language concerned. These rules also apply to translation in South Africa's official indigenous languages, where the pool of competent translators is currently not as large as that for English/Afrikaans, and so rates are generally higher than for English/Afrikaans, but will probably level out in time.

When it comes to interpreting, charges are made on an hourly or daily rate. Here it is important to take into account the highly specialised nature of this work when judging whether a rate is fair or not. Remember also that the interpreter's rate includes the time she/he has to spend in preparation, which the client may not see – familiarising her/himself with terminology, conference papers, background information, etc. This is time that needs to be remunerated, but is not generally charged separately. In addition, bear in mind that clients may be charged for a full day in certain instances where the interpreter does not work the entire period, either because they have to be available for the entire period or because the timing of the assignment prevents them from taking on any other work that day.

In the language profession, it is a general rule of thumb that editing is charged at half of the translation rate. Proofreading (i.e. checking a proof page against the original text, NOT a form of light editing!) is generally charged at half the editing rate or a quarter of the translation rate. If a light edit is in actual fact all that is required, this could possibly be charged at a third of the translation rate.

Charges for translation can be based on the number of words in either the source text (the original text) or the target text (the translation). The latter is probably more common, but it is advisable to obtain clarity on this point for all assignments. The source text may be used particularly where one text is translated into a number of languages, so that a common word count applies.

Clients should remember that language practitioners are not machines – they do not read through a text and have a perfect translation emerge on their computers at the end of the reading. Translation takes time and energy and should be included in the schedule for document production. It is unreasonable to expect a translator to work through the night or over weekends without due remuneration for this effort. The more reasonable a client's demands, the better the product that is delivered will be.

Members of the SA Translators' Institute subscribe to a code of ethics. One of the undertakings in that code is that members shall "be guided in negotiating remuneration by the principle of equitability, and in particular to refrain from charging excessive rates". Another is "always to uphold the highest ethical and moral standards in their dealings with their clients/employers and in the practice of their occupation as translator". This should assure clients of receiving fair treatment from SATI members.

Remember: if you want a professional product, you have to pay a professional fee.