

The Use of Intuition in Interpreting

By Miriam C. Delgado, JD

I have been an interpreter for many years and one of the things that most fascinates me about our talents are the physiological changes in our brains when we interpret and yes, dare I say it, the almost “psychic” abilities interpreters need to have in order to do our job, and do it well. In her article, [The Requirements of a Spanish Interpreter](http://www.ehow.com/list_6550784_requirements-spanish-interpreter.html), Meg Campbell, eHow Contributor (http://www.ehow.com/list_6550784_requirements-spanish-interpreter.html), writes as follows:

“Another essential aptitude is intuition. Intuition is utilized in the interpreter's mental analysis of what he hears in addition to his expectation of what the speaker will say next. Without strong intuition, the speed of translation slows considerably.”

I fully agree with Ms. Campbell. What is intuition? The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines intuition as “the power or faculty of attaining to direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intuition>). Now do you recognize it? How many times do you say to yourself, “Now, how did I know that?” Well, maybe we’re in the wrong field. Maybe we should be out there telling fortunes, making a lot of money, and in two languages to boot!

Seriously, intuition is a powerful tool possessed by all humans. It is instantaneous and draws upon past experience to immediately deliver a result to the mind. Years of interpreting experience have programmed our intuition to react in a certain way when a set of facts come together. So for example, when the doctor asks this question, and the patient describes this symptom, it is more likely than not that the diagnosis will be such and such, let’s say, “gastritis”....and the word “gastritis” is out of your mouth just as the doctor says...”appendicitis”. What? Wait! What happened? Intuition cannot only be very right, it could also be disastrously wrong. Read the following definition of intuition.

“Unconscious thought process that produces rapid, uninferred knowledge or solution. Though it is not analytic in the sense that it does not deliberately look for cause-and-effect (causal) relationships, intuition is not mere guesswork. Instead, it draws on previously acquired experiences and information and directly apprehends a totality. Intuition can be visionary or delusionary, uncannily correct or horrendously wrong in its conclusions.” (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/intuition.html>)

The point is that we enjoy many special mental perks as a result of our language abilities. These talents are fascinating to study and to put to good use, and yes, to be proud of. But we cannot become complacent. Our intuition will kick in when we most need it and chances are it will be absolutely on the mark. But place a one second delay on it, just to be sure. Happy Interpreting!

For etymology enthusiasts, a note: Middle English *intuycyon*, from Late Latin *intuition-*, *intuitio* act of contemplating, from Latin *intuēri* to look at, contemplate, from *in-* + *tuēri* to look at

First Known Use: 15th century <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intuition>