



The catch-22 with certifications

Using the US market as an example

Certifications for linguists are, historically speaking, a relatively new phenomenon. The jobs of both interpreters and translators developed organically throughout time and certifications only appeared on the horizon within the last century. Yet, the topic of certifications throws up a seemingly age-old discussion about whether they should be a mandatory requirement for anyone offering translation and interpreting services — and for good reason. Because this is a more complex topic than one might think.

Certifications played an important role in interpreting and translation becoming professionalized. They also represent a commitment to professional standards and create the illusion of a certain quality promise. As nice as that sounds, it's not that simple. For three main reasons:

1. Certifying bodies only provide certifications for a fraction of all language combinations needed in a country, state, or region.
2. There is not just one certification for interpreters and translators but many different ones, primarily depending on specialization, e.g. medical and legal. In addition, there are fields for which there are no certifications at all, for example for interpreters providing language access in schools or for social services.
3. The catch-22: Interpreters and translators can't get a certification without work experience, and they can't get work experience without a certification.

Before we move on, let's clarify something first...

The difference between certifications and certificates

It is important to note the difference between certifications and certificates. For linguists who wish to stay ahead of the game and remain relevant, there is a need for continued education, and many institutions provide continued education courses that culminate with a certificate to prove that you have taken the weekend-long or week-long course. There are thousands of such certificates. However, these certificates are not the same as a certification.

Certifications are a third-party attestation to an individual's knowledge and proficiency in a given industry or profession. Certifications by definition are time-limited and often expire after a certain number of years – continuing education and renewing certifications are usually part of the process. Certifications within the language services industry are often affiliated with associations or industry organizations with a stake in raising industry standards.

Now that we got that cleared up, let's take a look at a few stats from the United States.

A few facts and figures

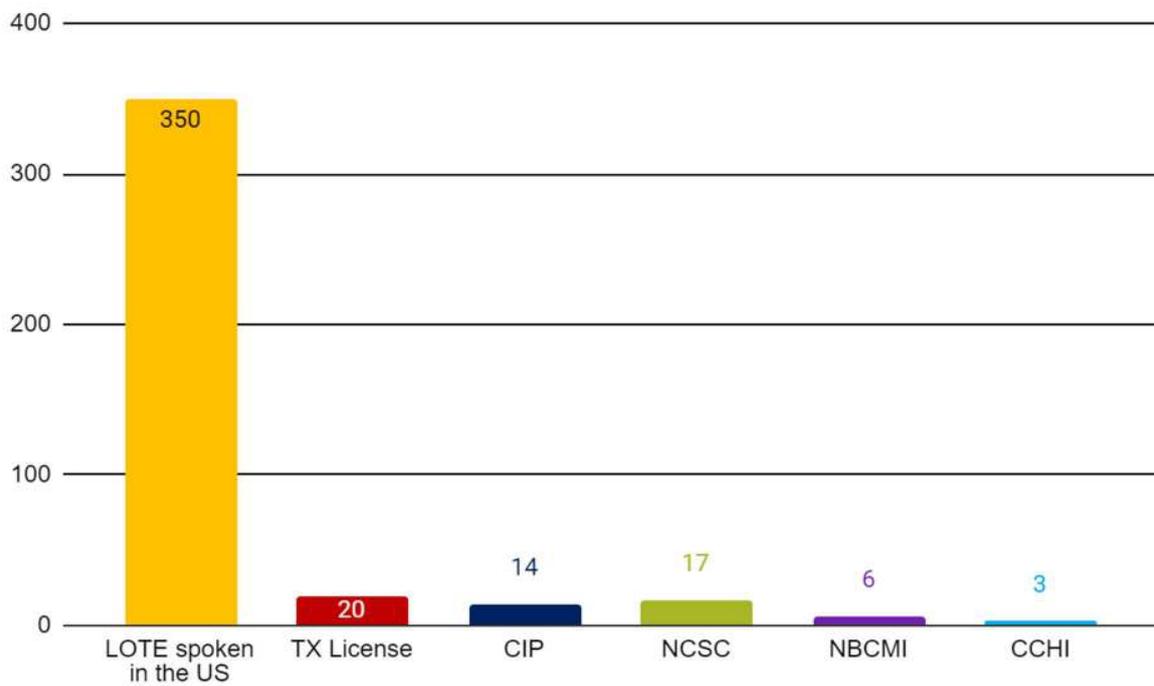
- According to the US Census Bureau:
 - [21.5 percent of the population older than five speak a language other than English at home](#), or more than 70.3 million people in the US, in total figures.
 - Across the US [8.3 percent speak English less than very well](#).
 - There are [at least 350 languages other than English \(LOTE\) spoken in the US](#).
- In addition, [close to one million people in the US are functionally deaf](#) and around 10 million classify as hard of hearing.
- The maximum number of languages provided by any certifying body for interpreters is 22. For translators, the maximum is 31.

Looking at these figures, it is clear that the math does not add up. The existing certifications do not even come close to covering all language access needs in the US.

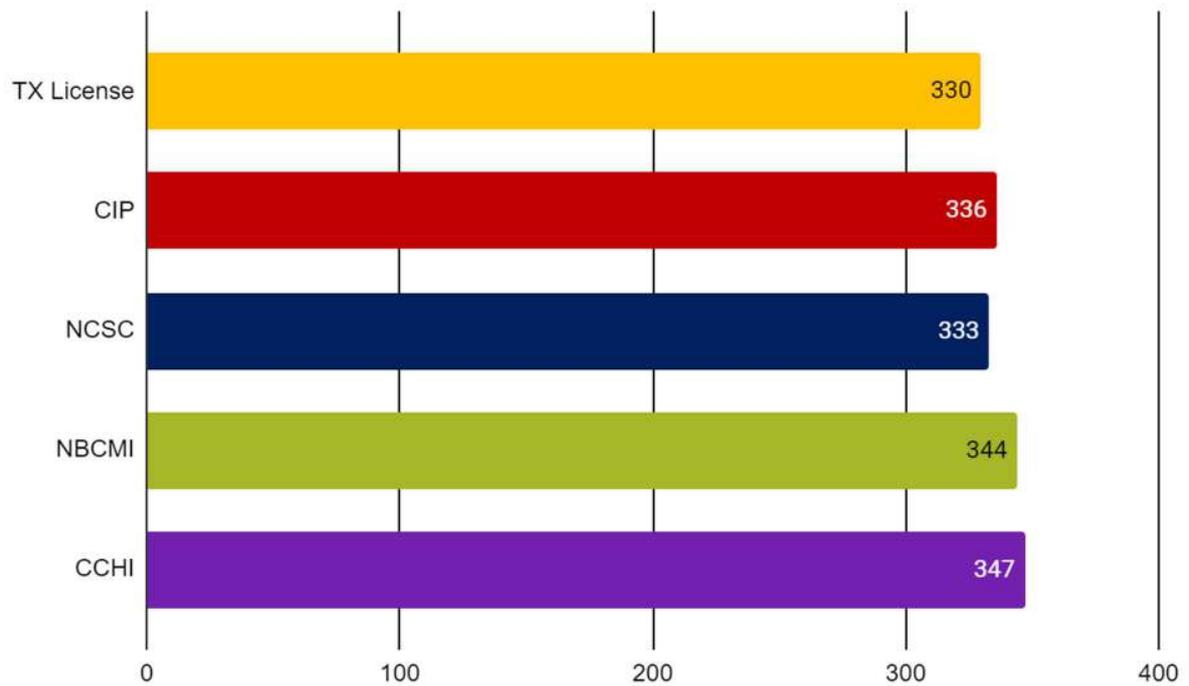
The next two graphs illustrate this further. The first graph compares the languages other than English (LOTE) spoken in homes in the United States vs. the number of languages available for interpreter certification, per certifying body. The second graph shows the number of languages lacking interpreter certification, per certifying body.

For both graphs, we assessed data from the main certifying bodies for interpreters in the United States. There are two national bodies for medical interpreters, the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI) and the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI). The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) created a test that all member states can use to certify court interpreters, but California and Texas use their own certification tests: the California judicial certification (CIP) and the Texas Licensed Court Interpreters Program (TX license).

Languages spoken in homes in the United States vs. the number of languages available for interpreter certification



Number of languages lacking interpreter certification, per certifying body



California: the prime example

According to [the US Census Bureau](#), 44.6 percent of California residents speak a language other than English at home. With 18.6 percent, California is also the state with the largest population of residents who are limited English proficient (LEP) — 10 percent more than the national average.

In addition, the [California Department of Mental Health \(DMH\)](#) reports that forty-nine of fifty-eight California counties meet the minimum requirement for the threshold language definition. A threshold language is defined as being spoken by at least 3,000 beneficiaries of the Medi-Cal Eligibility Data System (MEDS), or five percent of the population in a certain geographical area, whichever is lower. Thirteen distinct languages qualified as threshold languages in California.

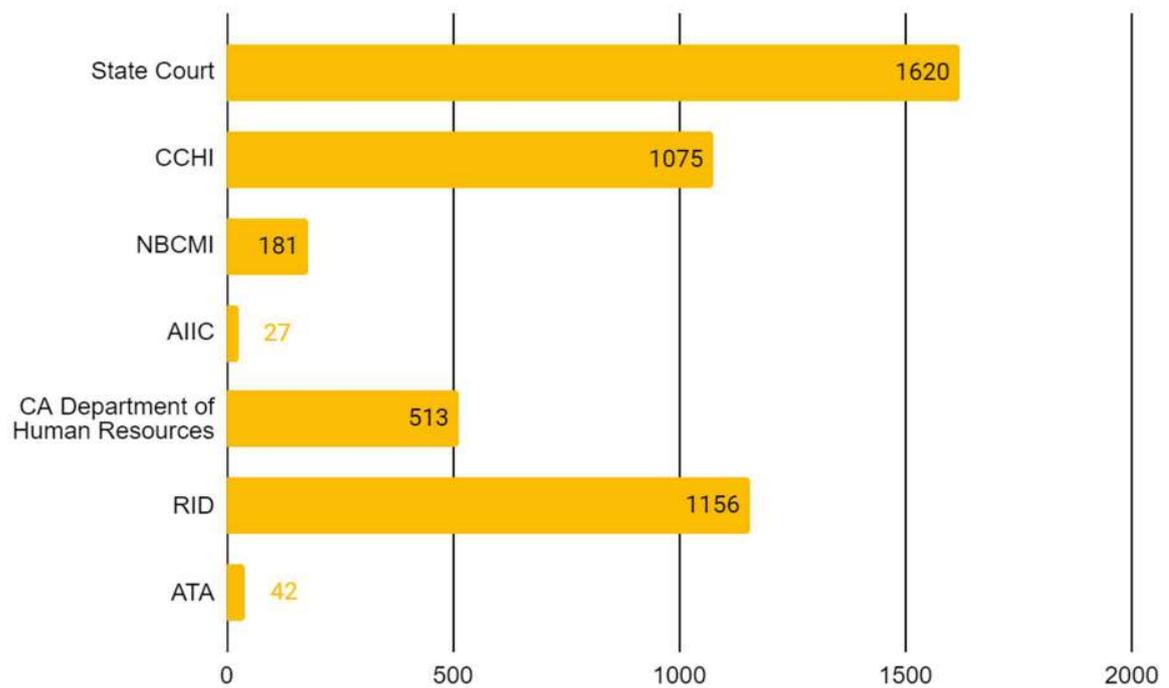
In other words, there is a significant demand for translation and interpreting services in California, which are required in order to comply with language access regulations. Yet, the number of certified interpreters and translators is extremely low.

Using data from the US Census Bureau, and registries from associations and professional organizations, we estimate that there are around 38,600 qualified (not certified) translators and interpreters in California. We are using one estimated figure for both professions, as there can be a significant overlap between the two. This is because while someone might predominantly work as an interpreter, they also have the ability to work as a translator and vice versa.

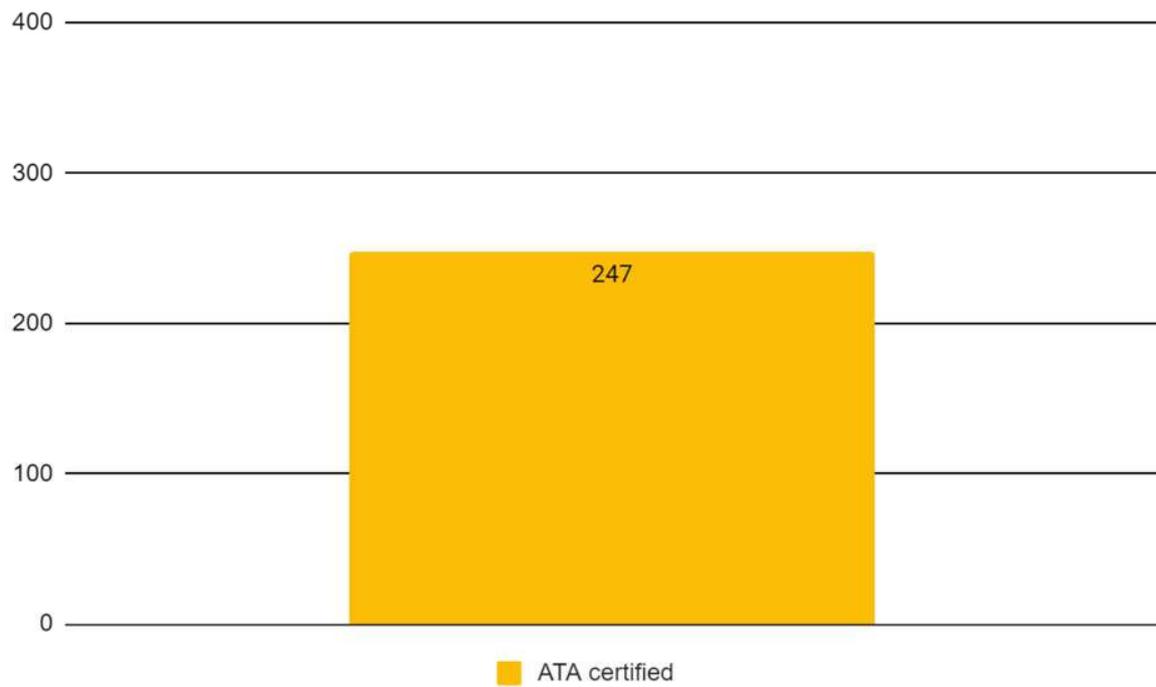
Throughout all of California, only about 12.6 percent of these 38,600 interpreters and translators hold a certification. This is not for lack of skill and professionalism but due to a lack of certifications for language combinations and specializations and the catch-22 of work experience and certification requirements mentioned above. The two graphs below show the number of certified interpreters and translators in California by certifying body in total figures. The certifying bodies represented in the graphs are:

- California State Court
- Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI)
- National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI)
- International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)
- California Department of Human Resources
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)
- American Translators Association (ATA)

Number of certified interpreters in California, by certifying body



Number of certified translators in California



The crux of the matter

Certifications are by no means a bad thing. As stated above, they significantly contribute to the professionalization of translation and interpreting, which in turn comes with certain industry standards and status. However, making certifications mandatory for the delivery of language services would actually prevent language access.

As the data have shown, thousands of speakers of rarer and indigenous languages would be excluded due to a lack of certifications, and even speakers of more common languages could not access language services in certain settings, for example in schools, for the same reason. In such a case, all professional linguists without certifications would be unable to perform their jobs, which would inevitably lead to scenarios where untrained people provide these essential services to the LEP population and, for example, family members interpret for one another.

Our recommendation is that instead of insisting on certifications, the focus should be on education. Interpreter or translator training is what most professional linguists undergo to enter their respective professions. There are certain techniques as well as professional standards that can be applied across the board no matter the language combination or specialization. In addition, there are even a number of training courses for specific specializations and languages. Both of these types of courses provide a solid base for professional linguists to perform their jobs.

It is important to remember that where there is demand, there is supply — and that demand will be filled by someone, either a professional or a layman. The United States has a lot of demand for language services, but making certifications mandatory would cut-off the vast majority of language professionals from supplying them.