

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATION/TRANSCRIPTION IN THE STUDY OF SHORTHAND

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I remember my late shorthand professor, in the days when I used to go to her house to take private lessons in shorthand. Besides the delicious coffee that she had her maid offer me halfway through the class, she always asked me to read the text once I had finished it.

This is what happened: she dictated, for example, a five-minute dictation of 80 words per minute. Once she finished she asked: "How did it go?" And I answered: "It went well" or "It was ok", or even "It wasn't that good". No matter what I answered Mrs. Conceição Ballalai's response was always the same: "Read it!", "Read whatever you got!" At this point there was no negotiation. The only rule was: you wrote it, now you read it.

Today, I do the same with my own students. After the dictation, I tell them "Read it!" I explain to my students that shorthand is not a goal in itself, it is only the means to an end. What is the goal? It is translation! The following comparison is possible: the shorthand symbols are a "record" of what we hear and translation is a type of "de-recording". Indeed, shorthand symbols are mere "scribbles", often comprehensible only to the person who made them. It is quite usual that another stenographer working with the same method cannot translate what someone else has written in shorthand. Why? Because, as with regular writing, each person has his own particular style.

In shorthand reading is made difficult by imperfections which significantly change the size of the symbols (either increasing or decreasing them), by the misplacement of important sound symbols and even by swapping (errors) a symbol for another.

Additionally, it is very common for a stenographer to create personalized initial symbols, terminations as well as conventional symbols and such "personal codes" are difficult or even impossible to be deciphered by another stenographer, even though he uses the same method.

There is nothing strange about this fact, since even ordinary handwriting is often difficult to read for another person. Nor is it unusual for someone to write very quickly and be unable to read his own writing later.

Who has not had trouble understanding a doctor's prescription? Why don't we understand it? Because the letters are so distorted they have become scrawls and are difficult to decode. The "a" is no longer an "a", the "f" looks like an "L", the "t" is not crossed, the "i" is not dotted, the "m" is a straight line, and so on. Only an experienced pharmacist – often aided to a great extent by his intuition – can decipher such scrawls. In the case of shorthand writing, translation should be an important element of the learning process, starting with the very first class, and especially when practicing speed dictation.

By reading what he wrote in shorthand, the student should be able to learn what words were not properly written and why he could not translate them. Thus, by identifying faults, badly formed and swapped symbols, the student can see where he needs to improve, which elements and methods he needs to revise and which words he needs to train.

In addition, reading can be an important aid in remembering the basic symbols, initials and terminals, as well as the conventional symbols. It works as a type of "visual memory".

As with any skill, the student will at first have difficulties in translating what he has written but with perseverance he will see that his shorthand reading becomes more fluent over time.

A student who acquires a habit of translating everything he has taken down in shorthand (orally or on a computer) increases his insight, sensitivity and intuition when deducing a context to the point where he is able to read even a badly written word.

Once, after a shorthand contest, a candidate asked to have lessons with me and commented: "You won't believe it, but for the shorthand dictation, I got absolutely everything! Everything! But I could not translate anything! My answer could be no other than this: "Well, you think you got it! But if you could not translate anything, you did not get anything! All you have is scribbles!" And then I added: "Come on then, now let's learn shorthand as it should be learned: **READ IT!**"