

Translating the law: certified translations, apostille and costs

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The international circulation of Geneva documents passes through translation and legalisation. A will, a foundation deed, an extract from the commercial register or a judgment intended to produce effects abroad must often be translated and authenticated. Geneva has a body of sworn translators, authorised by the cantonal authority, whose translations are recognised by administrations and courts.¹ For use in the states party to the Hague Convention of 1961, the apostille replaces the chain of consular legalisations, which remains necessary for other states.²

The cost of these operations is rarely negligible. A certified translation of a document of a few pages represents a few hundred francs. The translation of an international succession file, with its inventories, articles of association and bank documents, runs to several tens of thousands of francs and several weeks of delay. Quality varies. Yet a translation error in a legal instrument can have consequences out of all proportion to the saving made on the rate. Reputable Geneva institutions have in-house translators or designated providers, and have legal translations reviewed by a lawyer of the target language.

Machine translation has transformed this market without making it disappear. Tools based on machine learning produce, within seconds, readable translations of routine documents, which practitioners use to understand a foreign document or prepare a first draft. They replace neither the certified translation, which the authority requires from an authorised translator, nor legal review, because the tools' errors bear precisely on the technical terms, the negations and the nuances that make up the substance of the law. The Geneva financial centre, which lives by precision, has an interest in retaining a body of qualified legal translators, trained in Geneva itself, as Chapter IV will show.

Worked example. A Geneva estate comprises assets in Switzerland, France, Morocco and the United States. The certificate of inheritance, the will and the inventory, drafted in French, must be produced in English for the United States and serve as they stand in France and Morocco. The certified translations and apostilles for the United States cost around CHF 6,000 and take three weeks. Had the deceased drafted his will in English, a certified translation into French would have been necessary for the other three countries, at a comparable cost and delay, with the added risk of interpretation of English terms of succession law that have no exact equivalent in Swiss law. The choice of the language of the instrument is decided according to the geography of the assets.

1 Notes

1. Geneva Act on sworn translators (Loi sur les traducteurs-jurés, LTJ, rsGE I 2 46) of 7 June 2013, in force since 31 August 2013 (silgeneve.ch): sworn translators are sworn in by the authority designated by the Council of State after examination; requirements of a university degree, three to five years' professional experience in legal translation, domicile in the canton and good repute; official roll kept by the competent authority, with review every five years; the seal is affixed only to official translations, carried out "with accuracy and integrity", principally into French; implementing regulation (RTJ, rsGE I 2 46.01). ↩
2. Convention of 5 October 1961 Abolishing the Requirement of Legalisation for Foreign Public Documents (SR 0.172.030.4), approved by the Federal Assembly on 27 April 1972, in force for Switzerland since 11 March 1973; text on lexfind.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

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