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Red T

By Jeannette Stewart

“Our vision is a world in which translators and interpreters can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination.”

Communications are a critical component in modern warfare. Neither intelligence gathering nor logistics nor multinational armed forces can operate unless lines of communication are open and functioning reliably and safely. Telephony and computers enable signals intelligence and strategic ops, but what about the human element? What about the interpreters and translators who perform a critical function in modern theaters of war, often in life-threatening situations? And what about when the troops board their transport planes to be flown back to safety, leaving native speakers, who acted in this role, unprotected against reprisals?

Non-combatants in a combat zone face many dangers, but linguists, who provide the link between opposing forces, face dangers arising from the very fact that they facilitate communications and risk their loyalties being questioned, accused of being traitors, or simply murdered. This may sound extreme, but in fact this is the harsh reality interpreters in present-day conflicts now face.

The Multilingual Community knows how important translation and interpreting are to so many areas of our lives across all the countries of the globe. Accurate, effective and timely communication saves lives. But the bitterness harbored by many, along with prejudice and intolerance, results in unwanted lines of communication being cut; and, in this instance, that means translators and interpreters.

Many organizations have instigated protective status for their members, like Red Cross and the United Nations, while some occupations, for example journalists or doctors, have protected status and free access to conflict zones. The need for their services and their volunteerism is accepted by all as neutral and benign. Our own language industry now has a formidable new organization, Red T, working towards formalizing protected status under international law for linguists in conflict situations. To be precise and all-inclusive, the Red T logo has a distinct separation between the vertical and horizontal lines to clearly designate that this organization is for both Translators and Interpreters, T&I.

Red T’s mission is to “protect translators and interpreters in high-risk settings.” We should not, however, be fooled by the apparent simplicity of this statement into thinking that this will be easy to achieve. No global project is. Furthermore, adding the complexity of global affairs to the savagery of conflicts being waged around the world and the scale of the task can be seen in its proper perspective.

That perspective is effectively drawn out in Red T’s vision statement: “Our vision is a world in which translators and interpreters can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination.” This sounds like the kind of brutal subject matter that a latter-day Goya might sketch. We know ‘war is hell,’ but is it really this bad for mere linguists? The answer is an emphatic yes and Red T has the facts laid out for us all to see. Thankfully, Maya Hess has embraced the cause of protecting linguists in dangerous situations by founding Red T. As a forensic linguist, her work has brought her into direct contact with the

plight of translators and interpreters who are imperiled as a result of their professional work. Indeed, she is an expert who has been appointed to a number of high-profile terrorism cases. In addition to her linguistic achievements, she is well versed in criminology and holds a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the City University of New York. Hess was born and brought up in the German-speaking region of Switzerland. She moved to the US in the 1980s, working first as a freelance translator and

interpreter, then for a spell in an agency, before deciding to start her own company. Fast forward to 2005, when sitting in court, Hess experienced, as she says in her own words, “deep-seated alarm, anger, frustration and sadness,” as an interpreter was found guilty of aiding and abetting terrorism for doing the job he was hired to do. She subsequently used material gathered at this trial for her doctoral thesis. But this did not assuage her outrage. She became aware of many other similar cases involving translators and interpreters and this in turn led to her awareness of the dangers they faced in combat zones. Red T began to emerge from the world of great ideas into a real-world cause with a truly worthy purpose.

Motivated by this purpose that transcends national boundaries and political affiliation, Hess clarified her ideas by basing her dissertation on this cause. In order to establish authenticity for Red T, she first obtained trademark protection and began to spread the word in talks and presentations at criminology and other conferences and at universities across the world. In the course of participating in one conference, Hess met Linda Fitchett, the then President of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and Henry Liu, the current President of the International Federation of Translators (FIT). Together over a drink in a nearby pub, the trio sketched out their thoughts for a project blueprint on the back of a napkin!

What is it about translation and interpreting that results in it being deemed criminal? After all, are linguists not simply facilitating communication? Is it so difficult to separate the messenger from the message? Is an interpreter’s impartiality really compromised when the linguistic setting is in a field of conflict? Such questions lie at the center of Red T’s purpose. Hess coined the term “translator-traitor mentality” (TTM) in her effort to encapsulate the distrust that linguists are treated with when they work. That distrust ranges from uneasiness with unknown cultures at one end of the spectrum to the agitated mindsets of national and cultural phobias at the other. With such insight, she reasoned that TTM is generally not language-specific, but rather arises from the socio-

religio-political context of linguists’ work, as evidenced by Russophobia during the Cold War and more recently Islamophobia in the post-9/11 world.

In the safe, impartial world of everyday translation and interpreting, educational achievement, certification and professionalism are expected as givens. In conflict zones, requirements for linguists are met in almost arbitrary fashion. Essentially, speakers of local languages and dialects who also have some proficiency in English, the default universal language of the international community, often find themselves co-opted into the role of an interpreter. So, while communication may well be achieved, the facilitator can find himself/herself cast as a conspirator in collusion with a hated enemy. The plight of such individuals is worsened by their lack of awareness of the full skillset used by trained professionals. Is it any wonder that under such circumstances ethical, cultural and linguistic considerations can be mangled and result in

anything from the unjust accusations to deadly threats that characterize the “translator-traitor mentality”?

In March 2012, Red T officially partnered with AIIC and FIT and created a Conflict Zone Field Guide outlining the basic rights, responsibilities and practices for both civilian translators and interpreters as well as the organizations which employ them. This guide is the first of its kind and applies to linguists for the armed forces, journalists and other organizations in conflict zones and other high-risk environments. The guide has already been translated into 13 languages and provides practical advice as to what is reasonable and safe for interpreters as well as which tasks fall within or outside the traditional linguistic role. The guide can be downloaded from the three respective organizations’ websites. Already, the Conflict Zone Field Guide has been used as a reference in the British Ministry of Defense’s publication “Linguistic Support to Operations” and in a Danish think-tank’s policy recommendations to the Danish government.

To add to the Guide’s successful reception, in 2012 Red T spearheaded the Open Letter Project, again in partnership with AIIC and FIT. The objective is to research cases and to advocate on the behalf of the linguists involved by sending open letters to relevant authorities. The initiative has since sent out 14 formal Open Letters to various Coalition Armed Forces, His Holiness Pope Francis and recently to the Greek Prime Minister Tsipras, just to mention a few. An extract from the Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Francis highlights the issue succinctly: “Civilian translators and interpreters are in the crosshairs of state and non-state actors around the globe. Recruited for dangerous assignments yet unprotected by the law, they are hunted down and killed by insurgents, tortured by military regimes, as well as prosecuted and imprisoned even in free-world nations. Tragically, these are the very people who bridge cultures in times of war and peace, and enable communication across countries and continents.” Joining forces with the Open Letter Project now is the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI), Critical Link International (The International Council for the Development of Community Interpreting - CLI) and the World Association for Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI). Each letter sent is a strong call for action, drawing the attention of officials, governments and the public at large to the often terrible fate of local linguists in conflict zones. Although some recipients of the Open Letters may be slow to respond, there are also instances of success, as demonstrated in the case of the release on bail of an Iraqi interpreter incarcerated in Turkey. It is the hope of Red T and everyone involved that by raising the awareness of higher officials, the fate of linguists in these circumstances will improve overall. As an extension of the Open Letter Project, Red T also performs another important service to conflict zone interpreters by submitting letters of support and affidavits in their asylum court cases and appeals. When interpreters are faced with death threats, only a small number of them are lucky enough to escape the conflict zone but often find admittance to their new homeland delayed. Red T responds to numerous inquiries from interpreters and always endeavors to connect them with Agencies and Associations that can provide them assistance, whether financial, logistic or legal.

One of the amazing accomplishments of Red T, along with AIIC, has been to unite various international linguistic organizations as a coalition to support its cause. As such, the newest project of this coalition under the aegis of Red T is yet its most ambitious. It is seeking a UN Resolution to grant protected-person status to civilian linguists in conflict areas, similar to

Resolution 1738 protecting journalists. After drafting a proposal, the partners have been lobbying and attempting to raise awareness among the UN diplomats. If enough delegates take up the cause, the UN will call for a debate, which will hopefully culminate in a Resolution. This UN Resolution proposal has been taken up by Baroness Jean Coussins in the British Parliament's House of Lords and has received the support of H.E. Bernardito Auza, the Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, who committed to promoting it before the UN Security Council once it is scheduled for debate. To drive awareness of the UN Resolution proposal, Red T and its coalition partners have launched a "change.org" petition. What started with one signature several months ago has gathered today 39,000 supporters and is only 11,000 signatures away from reaching its first milestone goal. With a letter addressed to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary-General and UN General Assembly President, the language industry through Red T and its partners is urging the UN to recognize the gravity, take swift action and issue a resolution protecting linguists. I asked Linda Fitchett, a close friend of Hess and a Member of Red T's Advisory Board, to tell me what she thinks the future holds for Red T: "It may be a long and difficult road, especially given the present political climate, but we all hope that ultimately we can give both translators and interpreters a safer place in this world, where they will no longer be condemned for the work they do to further communication between different cultures and where they will be given more credit and protection by governments who rely on them particularly in conflict zones. Language workers are largely underestimated and undervalued and need champions for their cause like Red T."

We all have opinions but they are not necessarily shared by all. It's similar with advocacy: some causes instantly grab our attention while we shy away from others. Belief and non-belief attach themselves to all of the principles in the spectrum of human activities. It cannot be otherwise in a world which witnesses murder and mayhem on a constant basis. We may become desensitized to violence or simply ignore injustice or become so fatigued and world-weary that we just turn off. However, when we do find ourselves confronted by situations that are undeniably offensive and when our instincts tell us that our common humanity is under assault, we feel compelled to speak up, to act, to change what is wrong. Red T is a cause that must surely inspire common support throughout the language community. None of our fellow linguists should be persecuted for simply performing their duties to translate or interpret source language into target language. Resolving issues in such exchanges should be left to diplomacy. It is thanks to Maya Hess and her fellow members of Red T that those of our community who are in mortal danger now have the rest of us forming a protective force that will ensure that translation and interpreting remain peaceful occupations under all circumstances.