Interview: Maya Hess of Red T

Linguists working in conflict zones and certain other contexts face various risks. Maya Hess believes that a paradigm shift in how translators and interpreters are perceived and treated is needed.

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Red T was established in 2010 to advocate for the protection of translators and interpreters working in conflict zones and other high-risk settings. Changing the way linguists are perceived by those who employ them and by the broader public is an essential part of that effort.

Founder and CEO Maya Hess is a forensic linguist who has provided language support and expert witness services in many high-profile terrorism trials. Currently, she is also a doctoral candidate in Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

LL: Maya, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Could you start by telling us how the idea to found Red T came about?

MH: Thank you, Luigi, for this opportunity.

The germ of the idea came to me on February 10, 2005, as I sat in a U.S. federal court listening with disbelief to the guilty verdict against an Arabic translator/interpreter on charges of aiding and abetting terrorist activity. The government and the jury construed interpreting at attorney-inmate conversations as material support to terrorism and thereby altered the landscape for interpreters in the United States. In reaction, I decided to write my dissertation about this trial. While doing the literature review, I became aware of other unjust T/I-related prosecutions and the threats faced by linguists in conflict zones. I grew increasingly outraged and wanted to do my part in addressing our colleagues’ extreme vulnerability. So I established Red T to advocate for translators and interpreters in high-risk settings.

LL: Your literature mentions “worldwide advocacy on behalf of linguists at risk.” Could you give us a few examples to illustrate the scope of Red T activities?

MH: While Red T is U.S.-based, our mission transcends national boundaries. We are in constant contact with linguists in Afghanistan and Iraq, respond to their queries, and connect them with resources. Through such exchanges, we gain insight into what’s going on in these contexts, which then informs our advocacy strategy. For instance, the stories told to us flowed into the guidelines we’ve been drafting together with your association and the International Federation of Translators (FIT). Our first joint publication, the Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services, is being translated into multiple languages and widely disseminated. Its purpose is to advise both parties of their rights and responsibilities, the knowledge of which will enhance their safety.

Within this same partnership, we have also begun work on a more extensive document, the first
Safety Handbook for Translators & Interpreters in Conflict Zones. In fact, current AIIC president Linda Fitchett, and I were outlining sections when Hurricane Sandy flooded the Red T office and we had to exchange our pens for buckets.

A more recent venture with a transnational focus is our partnership with Soshio, a company that monitors social media chatter in China. We have some anecdotal evidence of T/I abuses in that country but hope that, with a more systematic approach, we’ll be able to pierce the information curtain.

Another important aspect of our work is providing research and contacts to the media. For instance, we collaborated with Swiss TV on a documentary about the impact of the Twin Tower attacks on linguists working in the terrorism arena. We also furnish comparative country data on visa programs for T/Is – or the lack thereof – to journalists as far away as Australia, and connect documentary filmmakers with our colleagues in war zones so that their stories are told in as many venues as possible.

LL: What have been some of Red T’s other accomplishments to date?

MH: In addition to the activities I just mentioned, we have been doing a great deal of awareness-raising, be it on social networks, in academic journals, or at universities and conferences. For instance, to alert the industry and the general public, I have been speaking domestically and abroad about the dangers confronting interpreters in conflict zones as well as translator prosecutions in the United States. As you know, these issues have garnered significant attention in the mainstream media, which is in part due to the work of AIIC’s Project to Help Interpreters in Conflict Zones, the List Project, the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, and Red T.

Another accomplishment, if you will, is the Open Letter Project that we started last year in partnership with AIIC and FIT, and this year we’ve been joined by the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI). I am very happy about this development because it means that, for the first time ever, these organizations have united to advocate on behalf of colleagues worldwide who are subject to unjust persecution, prosecution, and imprisonment, and to address government policies detrimental to T/Is.

And then we do quite a bit of behind-the-scenes work. For instance, we link criminal justice scholars with interpreters in the field so that our professional practices and concerns are represented in their studies, which may be used to formulate counter-terrorism policy, etc. We think it is essential to gain visibility in this area and make sure that there are sufficient safeguards in place for T/Is. In that vein, I published an article in the British journal The Translator discussing how the so-called Special Administrative Measures, i.e., U.S. federal prison rules that are imposed on high-risk inmates, are negatively affecting T/Is, and also put forth some policy suggestions.

LL: Which of your ongoing projects could potentially help linguists the most?

MH: At this juncture that is difficult to assess, since different projects are at different stages. But, as symbolized by the red-and-white color scheme of our logo, we are very hopeful that our awareness-raising for the Red T vision – that linguists in conflict zones will be considered humanitarian personnel and granted protected-person status akin to ICRC staff – will ultimately bear fruit. This vision is shared by AIIC’s conflict zone interpreter group; under Linda’s leadership, they have successfully lobbied
the Council of Europe, and parliamentarians of all stripes have signed a declaration calling for the protection of conflict zone interpreters. I also want to acknowledge Eduardo Kahane, who was the first in the industry to passionately bring this issue to the fore. I will never forget reading about his “shoebox” full of newspaper clippings attesting to the murders of our colleagues, and I firmly believe that through collaboration our vision will become a reality in our lifetime.

Another Red T project that will be very instrumental in the long run is the database we’re building. I personally have a large archive of terrorism-related research involving T/Is, and for the past couple of years we have been collecting T/I incidents from across the world. Having empirical data to support our cause is a prerequisite to issuing effective safety publications and influencing policies so they are protective of T/Is. Until recently, linguists in high-risk settings have been a footnote – if that – in the mind of the public and, especially, of governments. That is slowly changing.

LL: In the T/I community the emphasis is often on conflict zones. I notice that Red T adds “and other adversarial settings”? What does that encompass?

MH: This refers to military, legal, and quasi-legal settings, including detention camps, prisons, courtrooms, law offices, etc. In such settings, T/Is, primarily those working in languages critical to the War on Terror, are often viewed with suspicion, harassed, or even prosecuted. Consider, for instance, the ordeal of Ahmad al-Halabi, an American of Syrian descent who worked as a prison translator in Guantánamo. When he was set to leave for Syria for his wedding, he was arrested and faced a toxic stew of 30 criminal charges, ranging from aiding the enemy, which carried a potential death sentence, to giving baklava pastries to inmates. In the course of a year, most of which he spent in solitary confinement, the case unraveled, and ultimately he pled guilty to minor infractions, such as taking pictures of the guard towers in violation of military rules. Of note is the military’s admission that a number of soldiers were caught doing the same; moreover, photos of the naval base towers were all over the Internet. Al-Halabi, however, was the only one singled out for investigation as a spy.

LL: You have studied the “translator-traitor mentality.” How is that commonly manifested?

MH: The “translator-traitor mentality (TTM)” is the shorthand term I came up with in my dissertation to capture the continuum and spectrum of distrust T/Is have been subjected to throughout the ages. The manifestations of this distrust run the gamut, with uneasiness about an unfamiliar language/culture at one end, and the abduction, torture, and killing of T/Is at the other. While certain manifestations of TTM are not language-specific, its more extreme forms are generally linked to a particular linguistic culture during a specific era that is defined by a particular political context. For instance, during the Cold War, linguists were exposed to Russophobia; post-9/11, TTM is coupled with Islamophobia.

LL: What is your personal experience with TTM?

MH: Having worked in the terrorism arena since 1993, I have found that TTM is common in settings involving Middle Eastern languages. Especially post-9/11, this mentality has proliferated, propped up by ignorance of the interpreting process, English-only mindsets, institutional biases, prosecutorial zealotry, anti-Arab hysteria, and the political expediencies of the day. While certain causes of this distrust can be addressed by increasing professionalization of the trade and by educating legal practitioners and the public regarding the role of interpreters, distrust arising from the cruder forms of bigotry is another matter.
LL: Have you found terminology, e.g. what translators and interpreters are called in various settings, to be a part of TTM?

MH: Certain terms are not helpful to our professional image and may engender distrust because of their inherent associations. For instance, being called a “fixer” implies that a linguist will engage in extra-linguistic tasks, whatever their nature. And the farther an interpreter ventures beyond the traditional boundaries of the profession, the more exposed he/she becomes to being scapegoated when things go awry. While “fixers” will always be hired in conflict zones, in the interest of changing prevailing perceptions, I prefer a less loaded label such as “liaison interpreter.” The latter term emphasizes cultural and linguistic bridging as opposed to outright agency.

LL: Lastly, what would you say to anyone reading this who might like to become a Red T volunteer?

MH: Help protect the most vulnerable members of our profession by contributing to our effort in any way you can. Be part of ushering in a paradigm shift in how translators and interpreters are perceived and treated.

Links of interest

The Red T website
Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services
Red T Open Letter Project
Red T on Facebook
AIIC Project to Help Interpreters in Conflict Zones on Facebook
AIIC forum on interpreters in conflict areas (Rome 2010)
Interpreters in conflict zones: The limits of neutrality (by Eduardo Kahane, 2007)

Recommended citation format: