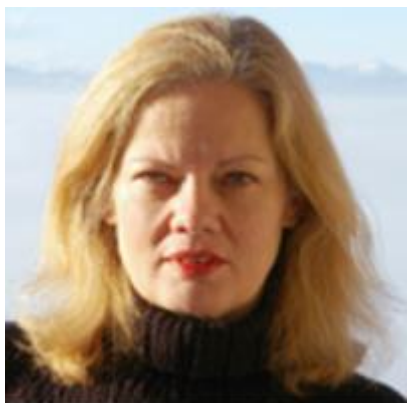

INTERVIEW WITH MAYA HESS, RED T

By Carmen Valero-Garcés

University of Alcalá
carmen.valero@uah.es



Maya is the Founder and CEO of Red T. As a forensic linguist on many high-profile terrorism trials, she witnessed firsthand the extreme vulnerability of the language profession. Seeing an interpreter unjustly convicted of aiding and abetting a terrorist organization, Maya could no longer stand by. She went on to study criminal justice and turned her dissertation into action in the form of Red T. Since 2010, she has been calling for a paradigm shift in how translators and interpreters are perceived and treated, advocating for linguists at risk by promoting policies and laws that protect them on a global scale.

C.V.G. What is Red T? When and why was it founded?

M.H. Red T is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of translators and interpreters in high-risk settings worldwide. The idea came to me in the course of my work as a forensic linguist specializing in terrorism trials in the United States, when, during one such trial, an Arabic translator/interpreter was wrongfully convicted of aiding and abetting terrorist activity. Against a post-9/11 backdrop of moral panic and Islamophobia, the government and the jury had construed sight translating and interpreting at inmate-attorney conversations as material support to terrorism. At the time, I was getting a doctorate in criminal justice at the City University of New York and decided to write my dissertation about this case (https://academicworks.cuny.edu.gc_etds/226/). In doing my literature review, I came across other unjust T/I-related prosecutions and learned about the threats faced by linguists working in conflict situations. Realizing that the simple practice of our profession makes thousands of us vulnerable to the loss of life, limb and liberty, I could not just stand by. After some preliminary focus group and trademark work, I formally established Red T in 2010.

C.V.G. You come from the field of forensic linguistics and law. How did your interest in translation and interpretation come about?

M.H. If you grow up in Switzerland, you can't help but be multilingual. So, when I resettled to the United States, a natural next step was to put my language skills to good use. And I was very fortunate to land a number of fascinating assignments, which included serving as the court interpreter in the Swiss Nanny arson-murder trial, translating documents in the Nazi Gold scandal, and managing the foreign-language aspects of major terrorism trials—prime among them those relating to the

1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 1998 twin U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa.

C.V.G. What does Red T do to protect interpreters and translators in conflict situations?

M.H. We engage in a variety of initiatives. For instance, we advocate across the world for laws and policies that mitigate the threats to linguists operating in high-risk settings. Both the chair of Red T's board, Vigdis Eriksen, and I speak before governmental and intergovernmental bodies as well as at universities and conferences. And to support this awareness-raising, we are building a database of T/I-related incidents, which is foundational in exposing injustices and rights violations and in providing information to the media. We are also in contact with conflict-zone linguists and, through these exchanges, gain greater insight into what's happening on the ground, which then further informs our work.

To amplify our mission, we built strategic alliances with the world's major translation and interpreting associations, partnering initially with the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and the International Federation of Translators (FIT). Our coalition soon was joined by the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI), Critical Link International (CLI), the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), as well as the Conférence internationale permanente d'instituts universitaires de traducteurs et interprètes (CIUTI). Together, we are pursuing a UN Resolution for the Protection of Civilian Translators/Interpreters in Conflict Situations and running the Open Letter Project.

C.V.G. What is the Open Letter Project?

M.H. To fight for endangered linguists across the world, Red T conceived of this project and officially launched it with AIIC and FIT in 2012. Within its framework, we write letters to individual governments urging them to adopt protective policies for T/Is who worked for their armed forces or release wrongfully incarcerated linguists. The list of signatories to these letters has been growing steadily. In addition to the seven core members—AIIC, FIT, IAPTI, CLI, WASLI, CIUTI and Red T—we now have another six permanent signatories, among them the European Network for Public Service Interpreting (ENPSIT) and the European Legal Translators and Interpreters Association (EULITA). And, depending on the recipient of a given Open Letter, we call on ad hoc signatories from the corresponding country and region. This coming together in solidarity is a historic first for our industry and particularly exciting because it demonstrates unity across countries and continents, which increases our strength and ability to influence policy.

C.V.G. What measures would you suggest to address the overall lack of protection for translators and interpreters (T/I)?

M.H. There is ample, gruesome evidence that the protection mechanisms currently available in international humanitarian law are not sufficient. That is why the time has come to take a more proactive approach and enhance our protection as civilians, especially since we often operate on the frontlines. A good place to start would be the UN Resolution I mentioned earlier, in which the content would approximate that used in addressing the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. And while I realize that such a resolution is not binding, it does represent a political commitment by the member states. The text our coalition envisions would explicitly recognize that civilian T/Is in conflict situations face the ongoing risk of threats. It would call on states to publicly

condemn attacks on linguists and urge those states to ensure accountability by dedicating the resources to investigate and prosecute these attacks. Overall, the text (a proposed draft of which is on the Red T website) would encourage the implementation of a culture of safety. To make this happen, we are currently in talks with the Permanent Mission to the UN of various countries to sponsor/co-sponsor such a Resolution.

Another protective measure could be a document similar to The Montreux Document, which was issued by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the International Committee of the Red Cross and lays out the “pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for States related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict.” At a time when war is increasingly outsourced, I think it is critical to have a document tailored to companies that hire T/Is in conflict zones.

So, our coalition is working hard to get traction for both these efforts.

C.V.G. When talking about situations of great danger to translators and interpreters, which are considered or included in Red T's line of action? Wars? Racial conflicts? Religious conflicts? Gender conflicts? On a national or international level?

M.H. All of the above situations pertain, with the exception of gender conflicts; however, the categories are not neat and situations are often hybrid and fluid. For example, the case that gave rise to Red T was national, but with an international extension, and it also had an Islamophobic component. With regard to the war in Afghanistan, the interpreters are generally from the host nation; the coalition forces are international; and the insurgents who threaten the T/Is for various cultural, religious and political reasons are national, i.e., the Taliban, and pan-regional, i.e., ISIS.

C.V.G. What profile do T/Is operating in conflict situations usually have? Local ad hoc? Untrained? Professional? Male? Female?

M.H. The profile depends on both the high-risk setting in which the T/Is operate (e.g., theaters of war, prisons, detention centers, sites of political unrest, terrorism trials) and the particular employer. To illustrate: In war zones, the T/Is tend to be largely local, untrained male civilians who are contracted by the different armed forces because they speak, to a greater or lesser extent, the language of their employer; in contrast, in the case of T/Is working on terrorism trials, the courts or court-appointed agencies generally hire professionals of both genders although, in my experience, the majority of them are male.

C.V.G. As the subject of this issue of FITISPSO IJ Civil Rights, do you think the civil rights of T/Is are respected less than or equal to those of other professions?

M.H. I shy away from outright comparisons and generalizations because other professions also have their share of civil rights violations, and percentages cannot be calculated reliably. What I would say, though, is that T/Is are generally mentioned solely in the context of the civil rights of other groups, for instance, in terms of language access, whether it's in the judicial, healthcare or other comparable fields. And one could argue that the same applies to international humanitarian law. In fact, in a study on the legal status of interpreters commissioned by AIIC, Professor Giulio Bartolini from Italy's University of Roma Tre found that they are accorded less attention in legal

doctrine and international practice than other categories such as journalists; as a case in point, consider the Geneva Conventions, where our profession is only cited in reference to the rights others have to our services. And the above are only two of many revealing examples.

C.V.G. Why do you think that is?

M.H. One major contributing factor is that our profession is invisible by default and, as a result, crimes against us can be perpetrated with impunity. I understand that in many settings this invisibility is not merely desirable but necessary; however, it has been counterproductive in terms of advocating for our profession and, in my opinion, has caused us to lag behind when it comes to fighting for our rights, among them, freedom from persecution for doing our job and protections for staying alive while doing so. It is rather shocking that Red T's vision statement has to read: We're looking for "a world where translators and interpreters can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination."

Another contributing factor is that only within the last decade has the world language community come together to jointly speak up for its more vulnerable members. Other professions have been fighting this battle for a long time and are well organized and funded; for instance, Pen International has been at it for close to a century and Reporters Without Borders started in 1985. As you can see, we have a lot of catching up to do.

C.V.G. In which countries does Red T have the greatest presence?

M.H. Our physical headquarters are in the United States but we are in contact with linguists in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and our volunteers and sponsors hail from all over the world, especially Europe.

C.V.G. Could you explain a case/example that has particularly marked you?

M.H. While the most influential case was the one that gave rise to Red T (see my response to Question 1), it is the emails and messages from conflict-zone linguists in my inbox—I call them "messages of despair"—that have lodged in my head and my heart. They are always with me, and to deal with the sadness I sometimes write poems.

C.V.G. Has Red T received any recognition or is there any progress in its recognition?

M.H. It depends on how you define recognition. If you mean are Red T's mission and efforts increasingly well known, yes, that has been happening—for instance, I was invited to speak at a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages in the House of Lords and am frequently delivering remarks at the UN. If you are referring to awards, in 2018, Red T was granted honorary membership by the Asociación Española de Traductores, Correctores, e Interpretés (ASETRAD) in Zaragoza, Spain, and, in 2017, I received The Graduate of the Decade (GOLD) Award from the City University of New York for my Red T humanitarian and educational work. Happily, all of this takes us a step closer to fulfilling our mission.

C.V.G. Do you have any recommendations for academics interested in training and research in this area? And for practitioners?

M.H. Judging by the many recent publications I've come across and the flurry of requests I get for research assistance with master's and doctoral theses, the topic of T/Is in high-risk settings has been gaining attention in academia. I'm very encouraged by this development and hope that some of the results of this research will make it to the desk of policymakers. Having said that, I think the T/I field must become much more interdisciplinary. To give you an example: One aspect of Red T's work—a function of my background in terrorism studies—is to bring the translator/interpreter perspective into the field of criminal justice. I think it is essential that we connect academia with practitioners, because only then will our professional practices, ethics, experiences and concerns be represented in, say, an empirical study of interrogations that could later serve as a basis in formulating policy. What's more, by extending out from our field into other disciplines, we can chip away at the misperceptions that proliferate in high-risk settings, which in turn will make our colleagues who work in these settings safer.

As for practitioners, I would encourage anyone who intends to work in high-risk settings to professionalize to the extent possible. As indicated earlier, it is common in many of these settings for the individuals hired to have little or no translation/interpreting experience. So, it is important that they learn the basic skills of the profession and familiarize themselves with their rights and responsibilities. The latter is critical, since employers may assign tasks outside the T/I job description that could compromise professional standards and ethics. To help navigate such situations, a good starting point would be to consult the Conflict Zone Field Guide drafted by AIC, FIT and Red T; it is a valuable primer that outlines best practices, standards and ethics for T/Is and users of their services (see red-t.org). Overall, I believe that adhering to the parameters of the profession serves a protective function, and the more professionalized a T/I is, the safer he or she will be.

C.V.G. How can people interested in Red T help?

M.H. Readers of FITISPos International Journal can play an important role by sending a letter to their country's permanent representative to the United Nations requesting that the country co-sponsor a UN Resolution to Protect Civilian Translators/Interpreters in Conflict Situations. Our coalition has prepared a template in English, French and Spanish. To request the template, please send an email to contact@red-t.org. Additionally, people interested in lending their support should go on change.org and sign our petition for such a resolution: <https://www.change.org/p/urge-the-un-to-protect-translators-and-interpreters-worldwide>.

Moreover, if they hear of a rights violation (not including payment/labor disputes) perpetrated against a T/I in their country, they should let us know. We are building an Incident database and would be grateful for volunteers to comb through the non-English-language press.

It is also important to stay abreast of what's happening by following Red T on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TheRedT>) and Twitter (@TheRedT) and sharing our posts. This helps with awareness-raising and letting the public at large know that the world cannot function without translators and interpreters and that our safety is inextricably linked to theirs.