



The International Human Rights Arena as an Area of Opportunity for Language Professionals

International human rights organizations need language professionals who wake up each day wanting to do something meaningful and positively challenging. Let's take a look at this area of opportunity and what it takes to cater to such clients.

Last November, I had the privilege of speaking at ATA's 56th Annual Conference to an audience of translators and interpreters about the international human rights arena as an area of specialization. Though raised in the U.S., I am originally from Argentina, a country that underwent several military dictatorships since its independence from Spain in 1816; the last of which was particularly brutal. Argentina's so-called "Dirty War," or "Process of National Reorganization," is in part the reason I was not raised in my native country.¹ The last terrorist dictatorship started roughly in 1974 (though some historians date the beginning back to 1969) and lasted until 1983, when democracy was restored. The "Dirty War" resulted in the "disappearance" of an estimated 30,000 people—presumed

to have been tortured and murdered at the hands of the Military State.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, it was this part of my country's history that got me involved in human rights translation. When I started law school, I had already been working full-time as a freelance translator for six years. By the time I started my internship during the last year of law school (a mandatory requirement for graduation), I had 11 years of translation experience under my belt. (In Argentina, law school lasts five years.)

Because of my interest in human rights, constitutional law, and ethics, my "academic secretary" (similar to a counselor in the U.S.) suggested that I serve my internship at the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). I applied and got called in for an interview a few days later.

The director of the Buenos Aires office interviewed me in person. When he asked what I could contribute to the ICTJ, all I could tell him was the truth: "I've been a translator for 11 years, but have no legal experience. However, I think my translation experience could be an asset to this organization." When he heard the word "translator" his eyes lit up. "You're just what we need," he said.

It turned out that among many other projects, the ICTJ was working on a protocol for gathering testimony from victims of torture and sexual abuse in the trials against military leaders of the last regime in the Dirty War. I was immediately commissioned to translate reports, testimonies, scholarly articles, newspaper clippings, and all sorts of fascinating texts while working directly with authors and researchers who contributed their knowledge and feedback during each part of the translation process. I learned more about human rights as an intern at the ICTJ than I did throughout all my years in law school. By the time the internship was over, my boss had recommended me to one of the most prestigious human rights advocacy organizations in Argentina, and my translations were being published and making their way to the Human Rights Council in Geneva. It was the beginning of a new path in translation that would take me through some of the darkest events in recent human history while lighting a flame for justice, peace, and democracy in my heart.

Since then, I've worked with dozens of human rights organizations throughout Latin America in cases involving military regimes, racial cleansing, massacres, structural poverty and discrimination, sexual and reproductive rights, and women's rights.

I seem to have stumbled upon something huge: the international human rights arena is desperate for qualified specialist translators and interpreters. Wherever there are people, there's potential for injustice, and wherever there's injustice, there are people seeking justice. These people need to be heard, and language professionals are key players for making their voices sound loud, clear, and intelligible in a world that seems to only listen to a select few languages (i.e., the official languages of the most powerful bodies that make up the supra-state system).²

THE HUMAN RIGHTS ARENA AS AN AREA OF OPPORTUNITY

The human rights arena is a profitable and rewarding area of opportunity for language professionals. Those entering this field might choose to work externally for governments or non-state entities (e.g., non-governmental organizations [NGOs], human rights activists), or else in-house for international organizations such as the United Nations. The field is vast and there are numerous clients throughout the world in need of qualified professionals. As international organizations broaden the scope of players by allowing more actors into an area that was once reserved for member states of the UN alone, the horizon also broadens for language professionals with an interest in making a difference.

It used to be that only member states of the UN played at the international level. It is now the case that new actors are participating in review processes and hearings involving grave human rights violations throughout the world. This is the “market” for language professionals, but a position in this arena should not be taken lightly. After all, what is at stake are none other than the rights that ensure our continued existence and development in virtue of our humanity.

WHAT IT TAKES

Human rights are about ensuring the kind of existence that exceeds our mere survival as a species. They are about ensuring the peaceful coexistence of different people sharing the same world. They are about ensuring dignity and building the kind of future where every person can develop their life plans free from fear, violence, or coercion. They are about keeping an eye on UN states and making sure humanity does not repeat the atrocities of previous periods of our collective history. The system is not perfect. It can be subject to criticism and there is room for improvement. But at its core, and cheesy as it may sound, it essentially is about making the world a better place.

Language professionals in the human rights arena cannot be amateurs. At the top level, it is not an area for learning about translation or volunteering to gain experience. Human rights advocacy organizations need the best of the best in each and every service. They need the best lawyers to present the strongest cases, they need the best public relations professionals to get the general public to

LEARN MORE ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Amnesty International

www.amnestyusa.org

Human Rights Watch

<https://www.hrw.org>

Institute for International Law and Justice

<http://www.iilj.org>

International Center for Transitional Justice

www.ictj.org

United Nations Foundation

www.unfoundation.org

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

www.ohchr.org/EN/Pages/Home.aspx

United Nations University

<http://unu.edu>

support their messages, and they need the best language professionals to ensure their messages are conveyed adequately.

This field requires professionals who know the target language inside out, who have superlative command and comprehension of the source language, and who have thorough knowledge and a deep understanding of the issues and the law. Human rights organizations need professionals with sufficient cultural and linguistic awareness to help them adjust their messages and review their strategies when necessary.

Catering to this arena requires field expertise and a solid academic and professional background. Amateurs with a kind heart are likely to do more harm than good. So, if this is an area of specialization you are just now beginning to consider, my advice is to train hard and to get involved in causes that interest you before you begin translating. Make sure you know the issues, the terminology involved, and law inside out before you reach out to the higher end of this market.

It's one thing to volunteer to translate e-mail or newsletters for a local NGO, charity, or church. It's a whole other thing to translate at a professional level for international NGOs or organizations advocating and litigating before international bodies and courts. It's simply an entirely different ball game; one for which language professionals must prepare accordingly.

This is one of those areas of specialization where formal education in human rights (be it from a purely legal perspective or an interdisciplinary perspective) is as important as experience in translation. Though a law degree is not necessarily a requirement with all clients, having one helps. Translators in this field are expected to be highly educated in human rights related fields, such as law, political philosophy, political science, and economic science and Law and Economics (L&E). Translators for whom law school is not an option can look into a variety of programs offered by the United Nations University or international human rights programs aimed at non-lawyers offered by several U.S. universities.

HELPING INFORM THE CONVERSATION

As Martin Luther King once said, “[t]he hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.” The international human rights arena is for the nonconformist translator and interpreter. It's for the language professional who wakes up each day wanting to do something meaningful and positively challenging. It's for people who want a better tomorrow and are willing to work hard to make it possible. It's for those who wish to be “a voice in the conversation of mankind.” And what a conversation it can be with the right language professionals leading it! 🍷

NOTES

¹ Argentina's “Process of National Reorganization,” www.britannica.com/event/Dirty-War. Also see: <http://www.derechoshumanos.net/lesahumanidad/informes/argentina/informe-de-la-CONADEP-Nunca-mas.htm>.

² “The UN and the Regions,” <http://bit.ly/UN-regions>.



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