



connexions interview with
AFAF STEIERT

Transcript of the interview with Afaf Steiert, President and cofounder of Afaf Translations LCC, in the United States of America. Afaf also works as a conference Arabic interpreter.

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/channels/852448>

Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?

I'm a founder of AFAF Translations LLC, and this is a translations services company. And we have been found since 2004; I'm having my cofounder as my husband, Matthias Steiert. And... we have started with Arabic language and German language, and we went from there to all other languages in the United States. So it covers about 50 plus languages around the area.



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What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?

Our international communication experience in our lives was more regarding our real life rather than in academic life. I would say our exposure was more learning the languages we did fluently in schools where we stressed out in our education and our areas—we come from two different areas in the world. I'm from North Africa, he's from Europe—and we stressed out a lot in our education regarding languages as French. And then it took us from there, we went into science—we are both scientists originally—where we studied; I studied molecular biology and he has a PhD in biochemistry. And this actually recommended us to fly all over the world because of science, you couldn't be in one place as a hub. You have to go internationally. So we had actually to interact, communicate with people around the entire world. So we had about ten years of our life, mainly traveling every two years between different countries and different languages. I had to study Italian, a bit of Dutch, some German. I forgot my French on the way... and I just landed in USA where I met every nationality you can ever think of like... in Bay Area we are very fortunate to have every Asian... like language you can get introduced to, where you actually tend to understand the culture through the communication. And I still feel like, even if we do speak English, we still can have a barrier. Once you do speak to the person with his own language, is very different to convince him of your point. You can only say “Hello,” “Goodbye” and “You're a very nice person” but you cannot do a real connected relation except when you start to speak the person's language.

And from there, we went into, like... we can see that the science is only dominated by English, except for French—the French, only scientists, they're the ones who keep the articles in French, a little bit of Arabic; they keep it up, which nobody reads their papers, scientifically. And from there it came to us the idea that we have to do a scientific translation company where it's focusing—when it's coming to technical or scientists, it's not only translators who do the job; besides language, you need to have also background on what you are translating.

So our present and past and future is actually all about international communication. It's not only languages, it's also the brain, the way you are educated, the way you are thinking, and the way you want to deliver the information. Does it go

through your brain, or doesn't it go through... Especially when it comes to technical cum scientific, it's different from literature, like, since a long time has been translated the novels of Nagib Mahfuz and lots of nobel prize laureats for writers where you can go with the writer and imagine... But really, like, not easy times where it came and still very new... the patterns right now for translating into Middle Eastern languages—Arabic... California now is getting very cautious about when you want to give an information for parents or new immigrants about their kids, everybody's very important for him—their health, their children, their education—and it's very important for a new immigrant, even if he knows “Hello,” “Goodbye,” to get the information written, printed, well done, translated, that you can reach to him. Then he will follow what you're saying; whatever is the rules; whatever you want him to help his child as. So you're definitely convincing the origins of the entire world once you're international communicating with them through their own language.

What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

Our practice—we are more into practice, we research a little bit, you know, at this point, because we are not really researching into translation. But through our start-up, when we started in 2004, we definitely accomplished a lot. I can explain to you regarding technical translation and regarding scientific translation... I can say we have definitely reached to a perfection in Arabic translation; definitely into a lot of other languages, as Spanish for medical field. So we definitely have delivered a lot of information very precisely, and this is very important... where we included as well localizations beside translation. And this is a big accomplishment, because a lot of times you can see localization is a little bit working away of translation in some situations.

What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication—practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

When you speak about the region of the world, because we do work with a lot of regions of the world. We do work with... once we are translating, we tend to work with

the entire world because there is good translators in the United States, there is very good translators in Europe, very good translators in the Middle East, as well. So when I'm speaking about the region of USA and the challenges we are facing, the speed is very good with IT. We are actually really on the spot and we are definitely finishing our deadlines in the speed of light. But it's still very challenging to reach to a point where you want to know how perfected is the work done within the short time. It's really nice that we are having Skype, it's so good we are having the cloud, we are having localization program. But it's so hard to find... like... a person who knows most of everything. It's so hard to find the translation agency who does everything, and that's a big challenge. And when you want to go to a store to shop something, it's much easier to shop everything in one store, rather than you keep going to five stores to get your five items. One place localization; one place desktop publishing; one place translation; one place interpreting; one place specialized in science; one place specialized in novels. It would be great if we are all one world or we are at least knowing how to work together and knowing how to get... introducing each other; not only on the value of money and the time; it's also on the value of the importance of every step in the whole process.

How do you see technology, or changes in technology, impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication research, practice, or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

It's a bit related to the previous question, where definitely technology is never harmful because without it, by now, I wouldn't be introduced in the translation field. For example, if it was twenty years ago, I wouldn't have had the idea and the skills of... like... how would I enter this field without all this technology we are having. So we do have abundance of technology. The only problem of this challenge is the human beings which you are working with. Because there is a lot of people who are behind the technology, a lot of people who are advanced in the technology, and you have to work with both of them... because you need to meet them one point. There is lots of skilled translators who are not so updated on what's going on in localization—they don't get it, the point of... like... let us work in Excel sheet, "Let us think about the left to right"—the Panjabi, where it has zillions of fonts. They do not get it. "Why do you want this exact font?" This one translator, I'm... like "We do need this word because we need it

for the localizer to work on this exact font.” And he doesn’t have it on his computer. So that’s a challenge. There is a lot of challenges we have to work on it, and it’s mainly involving... besides the IT in the international communication, and the technology, it’s the people. We need to train them, we need to explain to them, we need to tell them why are we wanting to do it this way—not just the other different way.

What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skillsets has higher education taught students to have them transitioned to industry? And in what ways could higher education do a better job of preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

In the USA, I would say higher education can do much more than this—definitely! Because I’m seeing a lot, and I rely a lot on interns, I have to tell you. Every summer, every holiday, I get from high students to bachelors to undergraduates of linguists. And I see a lot of barriers. I find, like... students who know how to speak Spanish well; they can know how to understand but they don’t know how to make a project manager work. There is a lot of outreach programs has to be done. This is like an organization of American Translator Association they are starting, where they encourage every translator or everybody in the industry should go and speak a little bit to the higher education students... like in the high school or in the middle school. Besides loving the language, you need to have some skills besides you want to speak, because you are not going to speak to your computer while you’re project managing. You need to have the skills of... you want the material to be perfected. You like the computer, you want to actually work in some formatting issues, which is nothing to do with languages! It’s a matter of you want to deliver a good quality at the end of the day. And this needs to be explained and experienced with the undergraduate higher education students. They need a lot of guidance; they do not understand what is the importance of international communication. It’s like, “I’m needing a degree and I need a job! And I need to sit in front of a computer, and everything will come by itself.” No, it doesn’t come by itself! You need to train your translators, you need to communicate with your translators, you need to be on the spot—very strict. You need to meet deadlines, you need to work seriously. It’s not a fun job where we just wander around because it’s languages. We will not speak about weather all the time. We have to speak serious things at a certain

point. And the industry is actually very demanding, besides the language. If you have a mother-tongue, it's a great plus. You don't have to love the language because your mother and father are speaking Chinese, or Korean, or Spanish. You are actually forced as an American immigrant that your parents keep saying, "You need to know some language for your family when you return back home."

So this is something we can actually introduce in the schools that is very good—that you can manage a language. You don't have to over-perfect it. You can actually use your skills as a computer engineer, or as a localizer, or a programming... like accounting program for translators. So lots of different—you can be even like scientist like me, and you can end up in translation because there is a need for you. Because we are needing your field in specification regarding with your language, your mother tongue or, if you know a certain level, if you are really super good and you're so passionate on sitting and translating... everybody... when I started my company, "So what language do you translate?" I'm "I don't translate anymore. I started as a freelancer. I translated myself. Once you're a company, it's completely different. It's not like you sit and translate. It's either you perfect your work, either you find a good translator, or you find a desktop publisher. You have to have a talent in one of the steps, but you don't have to be all the steps."

Last question, what have industry done, well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets and what else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

Luckily, because the market is needing international professional communications, actually we are really doing a lot in the right track. A lot of internships are really stressed out right now in the undergraduate field where they come from the second year to check it out. I have very good interns... where they are having some skills, but they couldn't have it all. The best intern person I got was a person who... who just wanted to study lots of languages. He don't only like one language, and he don't want to only to study grammar. He actually wanted to study several languages. Because he even didn't want to work on translation anymore, he wanted to work in a... like, international field.

So, definitely to train him in a translation company wasn't bad at all for him, it's helping him for his career.

Internships, associations, let the students... I feel, like, the participation of students very low in conferences. Why not give them a boost instead of a scholarship per semester—and honor for who is ever good in a certain... like, field or want to introduce themselves to the translation field? Let them get introduced. And they do have a lower rate, but students barely can cover their own semester rate, so in a semester... budget money, so they definitely will never be in a conference, and... and this is a good introduction: associations, conferences, internships, outreach programs. There is definitely lots of things to be done. And the hardest thing to explain to them... the more technology is going on, the more they are not getting more money. This is a real issue for the new generation. They think that “Boom!” you know, “You will just make it as a project manager in languages.” And they just waiting for you. The thing is that the computer is working and everybody can work... like, with one person as five-person work, but then, we still need the very good of the whole crowd. The best person who is having the skills of taking it seriously, working hard, trying to see what is well needed in the field. This is what we need to deliver to the higher education—where they have a guidance to keep going on it so we can reach to a good industry, a strong good industry. We definitely need it for our future.

Is there anything else that you want to add to the interview?

Mainly we should keep international communication starting from home, which is USA. When we started as a translation agency, there is lots of translation agencies. All what we thought of... what will keep us, you know, working is mainly science. But after we finished the science, you know, we are now so good in IT; we are now so good in localization; we are now so good in other projects where we can actually be more in demand of PowerPoints. So we do have a lot of skills, lots of skilled translators, lots of skilled team we're having. And it's harder the more you narrow everybody... like, “You're a small company.” “You are a scientific company.” “You are only a DTPer.” “You are only a localizer.” We can really talk together. We don't have to say, you know, “I am taking per hour this and that, and you're taking per hour this and that.” you know. It's always this comparison where this is more than important than that, so we never actually, a lot of

times, see that we work with a localization company. We can see the steps, but we never see how is it all together connecting. And this would help us a lot; that if we manage to connect with a localization company, that they work for us instead of we work for them; that we can actually collaborate and we can finish a lot of work and a lot of load with... on them that we can manage definitely to finish it. It's not like, as a translation company, we couldn't do anything else.

What other suggestions do you have for academic programs and curriculum?

Academic programs in the translation field specially... it needs actually a lot of programs to be made, because when I first started as a freelancer, I was like, "Where is the courses? Where is the interpreting? Where is hands-on?" There is nothing in the United States, beside New York, Monterey Institute for languages. I was digging for them and I thought "That's my only way to be a proper academically qualified translator in the market." But actually for lots of languages besides Spanish, there is no... any lights on it, and people are starting to be less encouraged even, to look for it because they can find a job without it. But then it doesn't... like... give you the backgrounds; it doesn't give you the steps. I still had to go for interpreting a couple of workshops to get the hints of "How do I take notes? How do I reach to this speed?" You couldn't be all this natural talent all the time in everything. You have to learn something. And there is these... books and things, but actually it's much better when it's a small course or a training course. So definitely, academically can work on their courses more.

Secondly, if there is... like... specialization of linguists—now I can see lots of students are actually interested in linguistics—they don't know where or what they would end up in. They just want to find a job with linguist, international studies, international communication. But they need the hands... they need... like... hands-on internships exchange. The exchange programs really helps a lot. The kids, when they are exposed to different countries, they can see how things are differently—how things are taught in a different way. And the basic is always the foundation for our working hard, preciseness, catching up with the technology, trying to grow—is the only basic foundation... is academic. We cannot do all of this flying, you know, which we are doing right now. We are actually running, and sometimes jumping and flying, but we do need a stronger foundation. It starts from the schools where it says languages... is important.

You use it or not; it's still important. It has to be stressed out that there has to be some, you know, communication, some interaction where you will use it one time in your life. It's never going to be vanishing. Like, even my French when it's vanished, I still can manage to how... understand the French translator mentality. So it's still... it's never evaporated, you know! The way when you learn how to speak, you learn how the brain is working. So it's all connected.

It sounds like there's a theme in what you said about the practical application of language of linguistics. I have taught at several Universities and we have technical communication, technical writing, professional writing. We also have literature and sometimes linguistics. Do you think that the universities don't do a very good job in sort of connecting some of that academic knowledge with industry means.

Not, you know, not doing a good job. Their foundation is more based on old times. Old times was "Let us learn grammar to learn the language." They don't know what this using Trados® means—the students. They don't know what is even Trados® in the first place. Trados® is a machine translation helper computer program—very famous. Like, first thing when you are a translator, it's actually allowing you, through a TM—a glossary... um, translation memory—that you are actually building your own strength in a certain field with... where it's your own terminology, and you keep it up, besides the grammar part. So besides the basics, which you are teaching in academia—which is the grammar—they need to get a little bit, at least seeing the struggles, what does it look like? It's not that complicated... program. It's a bit of a pricey program, but every translation agency must have them. Because if you want to finish 2,000 words, 3,000 words per day, they need to just feel it because if they want to be a translator only, they need to know how to do that. If they want to be a proofreader, they need to understand. Like, I am actually explaining this week to my team of translators the differences between proofreading and editing, and this is—I wonder if it's only in Arabic or is it in every translator, because I'm asking other people who are working in different language and they say "We don't have that big problem," because they don't differentiate between proofreading and editing. They give me their opinion when I tell them proofreading, they say "The translation is perfect." I'm like "No, we are

working per hour. We need to perfect it.” And this what I just posted on my Facebook, you know, of my company like yesterday... because I’m really arguing with several translators, which they are really good translators, but they just feel like “Why do we have to go through 10,000 words to perfect it?” I’m like “That’s our work! That’s what we are paid for! This is what we need to prove to our client that we are doing this job.” And this is... as academic, is hard to explain it, definitely, without the practice. So, you know, if they just can just go through a whole project... I know that in my days... was like to have a course of translation, the teacher give us a paragraph—and they still test us this way in United Nations and another department... US state department—give you a paragraph and just translate. I’m like, “Good, that’s for a good translator. But what if this translator wants to be an editor, what if this translator wants to be a project manager? Proofreader?” He doesn’t have to be all of that, but he needs to know all of that. So it’s nice to give the paragraph; give it in parts,. Give it translating; one group editing; one group proofreading; one group localizing it; one group desktop publishing it—and see the whole project at the end. Like, the whole class can work on the one project and see how much work it will be. So they need to appreciate and understand the other side behind the computer—this whole team was working, and they all need to work it together. And this is always a challenge in international communication. Once you are a project manager, it’s not only the project manager has to be the perfect... but he’s a strong core... but the whole team needs to understand what does the importance of... like, a lot of times, the desktop publisher do something where the client just wants a small tab or a small... just really important for the client, you know, to have this paragraph, you know, just space, and the, you know, the desktop publisher say “Why is the small details we have to discuss them?” I’m like, “This is perfection! This is when we want to, and you’re definitely, as an editor for, for a maga... a newsletter I believe so, you definitely see these challenges.” And imagine when it’s in a different language, and imagine when you are sitting in front of a text or a font where you never saw, like, before—and you still have to work on it! So this is what the students need to understand because they’re always like, “Huh?!” You know, when they come as an intern “What is this language?” “This is Arabic—from right to left!” I’m like “Wow! You know, you don’t even studied it? You never heard of this?” There is often, like, no introduction and definitely, you know, I know that academia needs to, you know, to teach a little bit of

a lot of introductions and definitely the foundation. And maybe when the foundation goes a bit backward from high school, you can have time in the undergraduate to give a bit—the newer stuff. Because you are stuck in the undergraduate with lots of curriculum—when it's the foundation they never heard of before—so then you don't have time to go a bit further than this. So it's a bit more like the flow—just... we need the water to flow a little bit further. This is my imagination.

I really liked the part about the industry and academic programs and, as the audience of this journal is mostly academic scholars, teachers and some practitioners, I hope that, through bringing voices like yours and a lot of other peoples', we will start and build programs in these areas. You know that's how everything starts at a university, when there is a demand and...

Yeah, I really... I really hope so because, definitely, I met a lot of professors of languages... like, in different language—that was in the Foreign Council Association or it's the ACTFL, so it's a Foreign... American Translation Council for Foreign Languages [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages], and they were actually trying to set out the basics for the tests—how to evaluate professionals. For example, the government of the United States; how do you evaluate the level of his language to put him in a position where he can be in the consulate of USA somewhere else in the world, for example? Or he can be in a profession in the US State Department outside of his country, as a representer for his country. And I saw the professors were really excited about the test, as they are academics. Because the test is mainly, um, how do you... it's nothing, like, written, you know, from what we have... were looking into... it's more like you are evaluating the way... how you are organizing your speech. So it doesn't have to be a certain subject; it doesn't have to be a certain question. There is some few questions where you start with, but then it takes you from level to level where you can know where is the education of this person has reach linguistically and academically, in a different field even. And the ones who were really excited about it was the academic professors of the languages. I noticed that they were like, "This is just, you know, really hard to evaluate the person: Level 1, 1 and a half, or 2?" And there was a lot of argument as like, there was just a little bit of "Uh, uh, but the person is so strong in this language." So you can definitely see that the professor wants to work on reaching to perfection

where it comes to evaluation of languages. Or... once you are putting someone in a position you want him to be a perfect speaker for example. It depends on what jobs you want him. So I can see that, you know, a lot of professors has a lot of ideas of putting lots of workshops and practical things, and they do have lots of energy. And they know actually what's going on in the market, besides, you know, like... in the working industry. They know what is exactly needed, because it's not like a professor doesn't know what is an interpreter—*What is he doing?* for example. He actually knows well, you know, and I met a couple of them. They say that “We know how it is to market. It's hard, you know, for yourself as a freelancer. For agencies, how hard it is to get contracts.” So all of this, they have a lot of ideas about it, and they just don't know how to reach it to their students. The method, I can imagine, it's all about hands-on because this is what a lot of us, you know, in the industry of translation, we simply go and do it. And we see, Are we good in it? Are we learning from it? Are we leaving it? So we don't really, like, study a book and say, you know, I failed or I passed, you know... ■

About the Interviewee

Afaf Steiert is President and cofounder of Afaf Translations, works as a conference Arabic interpreter, and oversees all medical translation services at Afaf Translations. She personally speaks 5 languages and has good knowledge of all Arabic dialects. She obtained an MSc in Plant Molecular Biology from the University of Basel in Switzerland. She lives in California, USA. She also lived in Holland, Italy and Switzerland for several years, where she was exposed to different languages and cultures.

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