Decoding the Babel At the Border

A nonprofit steps in when the private sector can't provide interpreters

Last summer, Rosie Ibarra Lopez was meeting with a Mauritanian man at a US immigration detention center in Arizona, where she works with a nonprofit that assists asylum-seekers. She asked whether he spoke French. He shook his head. "Wolof?" she asked, a language spoken in parts of West Africa. Again, no. She reeled off a litany of possibilities, but each time the response was no. Finally she tried Pulaar, a language from the river basin shared by Senegal and Mauritania. He flashed her a look of relief.

Speaking no Pulaar, Ibarra did what advocates along the US-Mexico border increasingly do these days: She dashed off an email to Respond Crisis Translation, which was able to round up a Pulaar interpreter for her next meeting with the man. The goal, Ibarra says, is to prepare migrants for a legal process that can last months or even years, "but we can only do that if we have adequate interpretation."

Respond has interpreters for more than 170 languages who fill a gap in the fast-growing US asylum system. As the number of migrants to the US reaches record levels, more people are coming from farther away. And private translation companies can't always accommodate uncommon tongues such as Sudan's Zaghawa, ▶

December 18, 2023

◀ Ecuador's Shuar, Myanmar's Zomi and dozens of others—sometimes dialects spoken by only a few thousand people.

Since its founding in 2019, Respond has expanded from a tiny collective to more than 2,500 interpreters and translators around the world, enabling it to quickly find speakers of rare languages. "Lots of requests come in for languages where there previously haven't been," says Ariel Koren, who started the California nonprofit as a side project while working at Google. "We hustle to look in our networks and our communities to find the people who can do it."

Koren, who speaks nine languages, developed the idea with a handful of other interpreters who were helping out in health clinics and detention centers. She'd worked on Google Translate and was part of a company program that provided computers to schools in Latin America, but as she learned more about high-stakes immigration cases that required language experts, she wanted to do more. Last year, Koren quit Google to work at Respond full time.

Initially the group assisted migrants camped out along the US-Mexico border, translating evidence for asylum hearings. From that first core team, the network quickly expanded to dozens, then hundreds, of interpreters as requests for assistance exploded. They first relied on donations from their family and friends, then in late 2020 the group launched a crowdfunding campaign that netted some $20,000. The following year, Koren started asking for contributions from organizations that had begun to rely on Respond's services, which it used to offer payment to more people in its network, particularly those who are migrants or refugees.

About two years ago the team got a pair of grants totaling $225,000, allowing Respond to hire more staff, scale up training, build an automated system for routing translation requests and add more languages to its website. When war broke out in Ukraine, the group sent someone to the country's border with Poland to hand out flyers offering confidential translations.

Respond now has staffers or volunteers in 87 countries, from Brazil to Egypt to Afghanistan, and has worked with almost 500 nonprofits—participating in online seminars for Russian asylum-seekers in Argentina, translating report cards for immigrant kids in US schools, interpreting for therapists treating torture survivors, plus hundreds of other jobs big and small. It also takes requests directly from migrants free of charge from all over the world, helping increase its total caseload by 30% this year, to more than 5,000.

The US government hires private contractors such as LanguageLine Solutions, Lionbridge Technologies and TransPerfect Translations—the same outfits that provide services for private clients such as banks and hospitals—to interpret for migrants' screening interviews and court appearances. Those companies are part of what market researcher Nimdzi Insights estimates is a $69 billion global industry, ranging from translating birth certificates to dubbing movies and TV shows. But a memo circulated last year at US Citizenship and Immigration Services said that the agency "may not have interpreters readily available" for less common languages, and that in such situations the cases should be put on hold until a certified interpreter can be found.

Migrants are more likely to be denied asylum if they speak an uncommon tongue, according to researchers from Syracuse University. Laura St. John, legal director at the Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project, the group Ibarra works for, recalls a client who did her first interview in Spanish instead of her native Chuj. She was deported and spent eight years appealing her case (which she ultimately won) in part because of errors in her file from that first conversation. "That mistranslation came back to haunt her through the entire proceeding," St. John says.

The Mauritanian man in Arizona was more fortunate. Ibarra's request made its way to a Respond worker in Berlin, who scoured the group's network for someone who spoke the man's dialect. When the staffer came up empty-handed, she routed the email to Doudou Koné, a high school English teacher in Senegal. He works as an interpreter of Wolof and French and is responsible for tracking down speakers of various languages from the region.

Koné queried contacts on Facebook and WhatsApp, eventually finding someone in northern Senegal who could understand the client. Getting the interpreter on the line while sitting with the man in a small room, Ibarra first explained that she wasn't from the government but was there to help him with his asylum application. After slowly building a level of trust, she set about peeling back the layers of his story. "This client told me that he had been in prison," Ibarra says. "He was beaten. He was tortured. And that's when he decided to flee." —*Maya Averbuch*
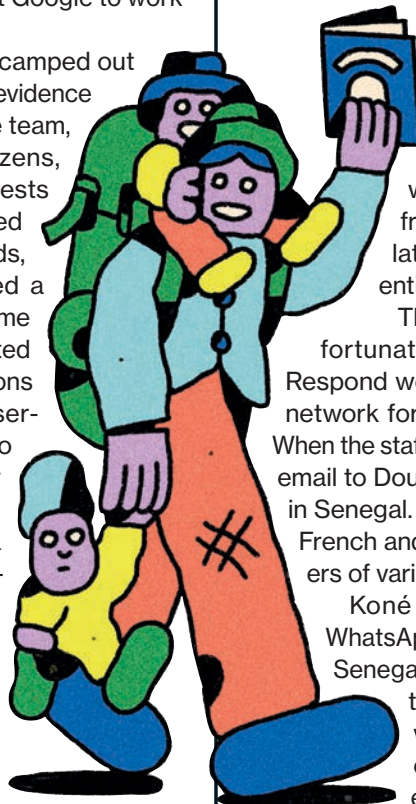
THE BOTTOM LINE   Respond Crisis Translation's 2,500 members in 87 countries have worked with almost 500 groups, and its caseload this year has jumped 30%, to more than 5,000.