


## Interview with Carmen las Heras from the Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance (CEAR)

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Carmen las Heras holds a bachelor's degree in Semitic Philology with a specialization in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid. She has worked as a Spanish teacher at the High Institute for Tourism and Hotels in Cairo. Additionally, she has collaborated as a translator and interpreter, primarily in the Arabic-Spanish language pair and occasionally in French-Spanish, with various non-governmental organizations. Since 2007, she has served as the National Head of the Translation and Interpreting Service at CEAR (initials of Spanish for Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance) and has supervised students from the Master's program in Intercultural Communication and Public Service Interpreting and Translation at the University of Alcalá.

Her academic contributions include publications on translation and interpreting in the context of asylum, as well as participation as a speaker in specialized conferences and seminars at institutions such as the University of Alcalá, University Carlos III, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Universitat Jaume I, Rey Juan Carlos University, Universidad Europea in Madrid and Nebrija University. She has also contributed as a reviewer for the editorial team of *SENDEBAR* journal. Moreover, she co-organized the conference *Translation and Interpretation Against Social Exclusion* and co-edited its proceedings in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Translation of the European Commission. As the head of the

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Translation Service, she coordinated the organization of the Interlinguistic Communication in Public Services Conference in 2019, funded by the European Commission. In 2019, the Gerardo de Cremona International Prize was awarded to CEAR's Translation Service.

**CVG. Migration is one of the European Union's priority issues or concerns. However, communication with foreign populations is rarely addressed openly as a topic. What is your opinion on the EU's language policy regarding the languages of migrants? Are there clear guidelines? Is this an issue of concern for the European Commission?**

I don't have in-depth knowledge about the EU's language policy in this regard, but I believe there is a clear distinction between the languages of intra-EU migrants and those of non-EU migrants, and that there is no uniform policy across all member states. Each country addresses the need for translation and interpreting services in its own way.

**CVG. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992, adopted in 1998) explicitly excludes the languages of migrants. However, many languages of migrants are spoken across the EU today. What is your opinion on this? Should the concept of multilingualism in the EU be reconsidered? Do you see this as primarily an economic issue, or are there other factors at play?**

I understand that this document was made to protect Europe's native regional languages and prevent their disappearance due to the dominance of majority languages. I believe that the languages of migrants represent a different reality. Europe has always been multilingual and multicultural. On the other hand, since the late 20th century, there has been a steady increase in the number of people arriving from non-EU countries, which has led to a growing presence of non-EU languages. To foster coexistence among all residents of the EU, it is essential to implement policies aimed at facilitating the reception of these individuals and creating favorable conditions to promote social cohesion. Naturally, these policies should focus on enabling communication with public administrations and supporting the learning of the host country's languages by migrants. EU policies should not prioritize only economic interests; rather, their primary goal should be to improve living conditions for all residents, regardless of their origin or economic status.

I also believe it would be appropriate to reflect on and reconsider the terminology used. Many of these languages may be considered minority languages within a specific geographical context—Europe—but not in their countries of origin. Therefore, the term “minority languages” may carry connotations that associate these languages with marginalization, as it is often applied to languages spoken by communities linked to economic migration and, consequently, with lower economic status and to non-EU countries. In my opinion, it's important to reflect on this matter, as it may be yet another manifestation of Eurocentric perspectives. For example, according to the National Statistics Institute of Spain, as of January 1, 2024, approximately 128,000 German nationals reside in Spain—a number that is not particularly large. However, when discussing minority languages, German is generally not included in this category. In contrast, Chinese—spoken by over 900 million native speakers worldwide and with more than 226,000 Chinese nationals residing in Spain—is often categorized as a “minority language” or a “language of lesser diffusion”. Similarly, Arabic presents another case: approximately 921,000 Moroccan nationals reside in Spain, without even counting individuals from other Arabic-speaking nations, as Moroccan nationals constitute the largest group. Yet, Arabic is sometimes also categorized as a “minority language.”

**CVG. There is extensive research in the field of Public Service Translation and Interpreting (PSTI) that highlights the lack of high-quality communication or even human rights violations in the provision of services to speakers of languages of lesser diffusion (LLD). However, in practice, the solutions offered for this situation are often limited or only partial. What is your opinion on this issue? Do you have any suggestions?**

It is essential to ensure that all individuals residing in a country can exercise their rights, and be aware of them, as well as their obligations and fulfill them, without language barriers posing an obstacle. To achieve this, it is crucial that they can communicate in a language in which they can express themselves without problems and understand the information conveyed to them clearly.

In my point of view, this is not an issue that lends itself to a straightforward solution, as has been observed in other countries. Instead, I believe that measures could be implemented to progressively improve the situation. In fact, some steps have already been taken in this direction, but there remains significant room for improvement. It would be highly important to establish clear requirements for translation and interpreting in public services, along with a system to validate that these requirements are met. Moreover, it is important that the necessary training and qualifications be accessible to professionals with the appropriate profile and that their financial compensation and working conditions reflect the importance, responsibility, and complexity of their work, as well as the investment required to meet the necessary training standards. Furthermore, greater visibility should be given to the work of translators and interpreters, although I believe that institutions are increasingly taking it into account.

**CVG. The right to use minority languages is often subject to nuances such as “whenever possible,” “when necessary,” or “other appropriate means.” These limit the demands for broad and effective multilingualism. What is your opinion on this matter? Should the concept be redefined and/or should the contributions of international law be reassessed?**

I believe that such nuances generally reflect the possibility of resorting to vehicular languages when it is not feasible or easy to provide interpreters in the native language of the person requiring communication assistance. While I understand that, in certain situations, due to the infeasibility, vehicular languages may be used, I consider this to be a risky approach. I think it is difficult to precisely determine an individual’s communicative proficiency in a vehicular language, and there are often ambiguous situations where it may seem that the person understands the information when, in reality, there might be a margin of error in comprehension. In certain contexts, this margin of error can have serious consequences for the individual involved. Additionally, specific circumstances—such as stress, insecurity, or fear—can exacerbate misunderstandings, increasing the likelihood of errors in comprehension.

**CVG. The use of *ad hoc*, non-professional translators and interpreters—individuals without training, who are merely bilingual (family members, children, friends, neighbors) and who may lack knowledge of the language(s) and culture of the host country—is frequently criticized by professionals in the field. However, thanks to them, some form of communication takes place. What is your opinion on this matter? Should the ethical code be upheld, or should it be made more flexible, with professionals also being trained for this? How can the quality of these non-professional translators and interpreters be assessed? Do they deserve recognition?**

In my point of view, relying on *ad hoc* interpreters carries a very high risk for communication, confidentiality, and the integrity of the service users. It also poses a threat to their right to privacy and, in certain contexts, may constitute a violation of their rights. Moreover, this practice may expose the person acting as an interpreter in a non-professional capacity—particularly in the case of minors—to serious psychological harm due to the nature of the information that they should not be listening to or the inappropriate level of responsibility placed upon them.

In any case, this solution should only be used in situations where communication is absolutely essential and where failure to communicate immediately would pose a serious risk to the service user's life. Furthermore, this should only occur when it is materially impossible to have access to a professional interpreter. I believe that just as no one would consider having a patient treated by an "*ad hoc* doctor"—that is, a family member or any other person with some knowledge of medicine—unless they were in an isolated environment with no other options and the patient's life was at risk, communication should not be entrusted to a non-professional interpreter. Likewise, I do not think anyone would find it acceptable to go to court with an "*ad hoc* lawyer."

**CVG. Do you believe that public service providers (healthcare professionals, educators, social workers, administrative staff) often lack the necessary intercultural competencies to serve populations of languages of lesser diffusion (LLD) speakers? Are we moving towards greater awareness in this regard?**

I do not have official data to support my opinion, but I believe that there is almost no available cross-cultural training for these professionals. I also do not think such training is necessary in all areas of public administration, but it would certainly be beneficial for those who require ongoing communication with multicultural communities. That said, it is unrealistic to expect professionals to be familiar with all cultural variations. The most important factor is that they maintain an open mindset and recognize that there are elements that, although they might consider self-evident, may not be so for someone from a different cultural background, or may be subject to different interpretations. This awareness would prevent them from making assumptions and encourage them to seek clarification from the individuals they are assisting, therefore improving communication and fostering a participatory rather than prescriptive approach. In any case, this is not an issue exclusive to speakers of LLD but rather applies to any professional working with multicultural populations.

**CVG. What is your opinion on the digitalization of LLD and the use of machine translation in institutions?**

I believe that digitalization and machine translation tools are closely linked to economic interests and tend to be more developed for languages spoken in countries with greater economic and political influence—such as English. Developing technological tools entails significant costs, and in most cases, private companies lead these initiatives, basing their investment decisions on the potential financial returns they can generate.

**CVG. What is your opinion on replacing human interpreters/translators with electronic devices? What ethical principles might be compromised? What reflections should be made?**

I think that, in any case, technological advancements in this field will continue to develop, as has happened in other areas. In the field of translation, automation is already widely implemented, and, likely, translators will eventually take on the role of revisers. However, if translating literary works—particularly poetry—is already an incredibly complex task

for human translators, to the extent that translation itself becomes a creative work, I find it highly unlikely that such tasks could be adequately performed by automated tools. Regarding interpreting, in my opinion, the technological replacement will take longer depending on the domain, since for human beings, interaction with other people remains essential in certain contexts. Additionally, I believe that interpreting has more room for improvisation, with interpreters making decisions in real time. Emotions are a present element in interpreting, often influencing the meaning of a message, and I think it is much more difficult for an automated system to accurately interpret varying tones, intentions, and the information conveyed through non-verbal communication. Furthermore, I believe that cultural differences are particularly relevant in interpreting, as they significantly impact the decoding of messages.

As in other areas, I believe the primary ethical concern that should be reflected on is that technological advancements are not serving to improve the quality of services provided to individuals but merely to reduce costs. In translation, automation could be used to save translators time and improve their quality of life. However, instead of being implemented for this purpose, these improvements probably lead to companies demanding the services, requesting translators to complete a higher volume of translations to maintain the same level of compensation, so as to lower the cost per translation.

**CVG. Experts warn of the growing digital divide, which we are undoubtedly already experiencing. What is your opinion on this issue? What solutions or recommendations would you propose regarding LLD?**

Finding solutions to complex problems is always challenging. I believe that a good starting point would be to raise awareness in society of the fact that investment in improving communication with individuals residing in our country who do not speak the local language will result in benefits for the society as a whole, not just for the individuals directly affected. With this increased awareness, it would be easier to obtain public resources to expand training programs, advance research, and develop materials and electronic tools that also include LLD.

**Access to translation and interpreting services in LLD, or with quality assurance in public areas, remains a complex challenge. The gap between theory and practice (legislation and its implementation) is significant. The migrant population continues to grow, and while awareness of the importance of languages is present, this discussion raises a series of questions regarding LLD and translation and interpreting (T&I) as a strategy to ensure the protection of linguistic rights. In this context, we would like to hear your opinion on the role of intercultural communication in which T&I operates, if only *ad hoc* situations are considered.**

I believe it is inconceivable that communication between service users and public services should rely on *ad hoc* solutions. In fact, public administrations allocate funds to ensure these services. The other issue, however, is whether these funds are sufficient to provide services of the necessary quality and to cover all the required areas.

**CVG. Why is the focus placed on less frequent contexts (such as criminal or emergency situations) rather than on the everyday contexts of speakers of LLD or minority languages? What criteria determine whether an individual requires linguistic assistance through translation and interpreting (T&I)?**

It is important to distinguish between contexts in which an individual has the legal right to the intervention of an interpreter or to the translation of their documents, and those in which the case is opposite. In situations where this is a legal right, the determining criterion is that the individual states that they require an interpreter to communicate. In contexts where this is not a legal right, I think the provision of linguistic assistance generally depends on the available resources.

**CVG. Can the provision of linguistic assistance through T&I be conditioned by the level of bilingualism? How can the quality of texts (both written and oral) be ensured across such diverse working languages?**

In my opinion, the best way to ensure the quality of translation and interpreting services is to have trained and highly qualified professionals provide them, alongside the necessary resources to ensure the efficient management of language service needs and adequate remuneration for these professionals.

**CVG. Based on your experience, could you briefly describe the situation in Spain regarding the volume of LLD and the resources available to address communication challenges?**

My experience primarily allows me to speak about the work of CEAR's translation and interpreting service.

The Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance (initials in Spanish CEAR) has been defending the right to asylum and human rights since 1979, promoting the comprehensive development of refugees fleeing war or human rights violations, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and migrants in need of international protection and/or at risk of social exclusion. CEAR's Translation and Interpreting Service ensures that refugees who require information to access aid and protection, as well as to claim their rights, can communicate without language barriers, even though they don't speak the language of the host country. These individuals also need to communicate with professionals from various institutions, areas, and support services that assist them regarding their situation and require translations of their documents to carry out essential procedures.

In 2023, CEAR assisted over 43,000 individuals of 123 different nationalities. Specifically, the Translation and Interpreting Service assisted more than 6,655 people in 22 different languages, primarily Ukrainian (19%), Western Arabic (17%), and Wolof (14%). In 2023, the Translation and Interpreting Service received nearly 30,000 translation and interpreting requests. Approximately 56% of interpreting requests involved LLD in 2023, a figure that increased to around 68% in 2024. In translation services, LLD requests accounted for 13% of the total in 2023 and approximately 51% in 2024.

I believe it is particularly important, especially in certain areas, that the individuals we assist have the opportunity to express themselves in their native language. One such critical area is psychological and psychiatric care, where speech serves as a means of expressing emotions and feelings. Given that even in one's native language, it can be challenging to articulate emotions and feelings with sufficient nuance for a professional to conduct effective therapy, it becomes even more difficult for individuals to do so in a language they do not fully master. In 2023, 27% of the total interpreting requests were for psychological or psychiatric consultations, a figure that rose to approximately 28% in 2024.

**CVG. To conclude, could you share an experience or insight that has had a significant impact on you or that you would like to share?**

My experience as the head of CEAR's Translation and Interpreting Service has made me aware of the severe lack of knowledge in Spain — even among linguists — about the linguistic realities of countries geographically close to Spain but outside of Europe, as well as their cultures and histories. In some ways, it seems as though we turn our backs on the countries across the Strait, despite the fact that we coexist with many people from those very countries.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION