



IMIA eNewsletter Article

Journey to a Place Where Medical Interpreters Don't Exist

By Edurne Chopeitia and Ann-Marie Bumbalo-Moreno

The “Primer Congreso de Interpretación y Traducción en Uruguay” (First Conference on Translation and Interpreting of Uruguay) was held this past September in Montevideo. We had the opportunity to attend and to present on Medical Interpreting and Translating in the U.S. It was a fascinating experience for the both of us. Through this article we want to share some personal reflections on the experience, from each one of our unique perspectives, as well as highlight what our collective experience was like in a place where medical interpreters don't seem to exist.

In Edurne's words (native's perspective):

Usually, when I take family trips back to my native Montevideo, I arrive to a place where I have pretty much EVERYTHING in common with the people I encounter. I am able to seamlessly weave out of the North American culture in which I now live, right back into my Uruguayan culture. This recent journey, motivated primarily by professional reasons, was the first time I found myself in a situation in my own country and culture where, all of a sudden, I was different. At a conference for others from my same cultural background, in my native country and in my “same” profession, my identity became challenged.

I am used to hearing and sharing stories with colleagues and business partners about adaptation, reinvention, nostalgia, cultural dislocation, joyous reunions or painful separations. We all experience a vast array of feelings related to hometowns, music, foods and ways to see the world left behind. Ultimately, the major task of an immigrant is to conquer the fundamental loss of identity that derives from those absences; through self-awareness and grieving time we can almost always get there. Finding an actual (new) place in the world is only possible when we reach an “internal agreement”, where we are reunited with who we were, who they said we were, who we became and who we really want to be.

In Ann-Marie's words (foreigner's perspective):

As a first-time visitor to Montevideo and to an international conference, I really did not know what to expect. I was so used to the Medical Interpreter bubble I've lived in for so long, that I couldn't imagine a place where the Medical Interpreting profession did not exist. I learned that Uruguay rarely has a need for Medical Interpreting, unless for the occasional tourist or foreign diplomat who ends up in the hospital. At the conference, it was evident how academia is heavily intertwined with the practice of the translating/interpreting profession there, much unlike what we encounter in the U.S.

Having attended and organized several interpreter/translator conferences in the U.S., I also took away some great ideas and gained an appreciation for some of the cultural differences that exist in the organization and execution of a conference in Uruguay. I found it pleasant to hear music being played in the auditorium in between sessions, and thought it was a nice touch during the coffee breaks to have someone actually pour my coffee and milk for me. And the photographer that was constantly shooting



pictures throughout the day, who I ignored thinking he wanted candid shots, actually was selling the shots as souvenirs later that day.

Aside from soaking it all in, our task at hand was to present to an audience that did not know how and why one becomes a medical interpreter in the U.S., just what exactly we do, nor what our daily struggles and challenges are in this relatively new and unregulated profession. We found ourselves presenting on a foreign concept in a foreign country.

We had to look at our own profession from the perspective of an audience comprised mainly of professional translators, students of translation, and conference and judiciary interpreters, who had all been educated formally to work as translators/interpreters through university programs. In fact, the only way one can work as a professional translator or interpreter in Uruguay is by earning a degree as a “Traductor público” (Public Translator).

Deciding how to organize our presentation was challenging. Instead of trying to relate to our audience, we had to step outside of who we were, and become somewhat more factual, so we could adequately express the core of our trade. Ultimately, we decided to go back to the basics and focused the presentation on the following topics:

- the History of the Medical Interpreting profession in the U.S.
- how immigration has been and continues to be a driving force for our profession
- how evolving laws, regulations, standards and protocols give us the necessary backing to carry out our daily work
- how historically, being bilingual was the only condition to becoming an interpreter or translator in the U.S. and how that continues to change and evolve through the tireless efforts of many different stakeholders and professional associations
- the significant historical moment in which our profession currently finds itself
- how we are continually seeking professional and linguistic “neutrality”
- how we support patient rights
- how interpreters and translators are the driving force to promote change for ourselves
- how we have some challenges to face and conquer to become who we want to become:
 - Strengthen self-awareness, achieve a continuous self-evaluation
 - Embrace technology to improve our jobs
 - Participate actively in our professional organizations

The audience was engaged and very receptive to our presentation. We were interviewed, emailed, phoned and followed around by students and seasoned colleagues eager to share their experience and ask more about our own. It was an enormous professional and personal privilege, it felt as if our journey had come full circle.



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The experience we had at this conference gave us the chance to stop and think about our place in the larger world interpreting and translating community. It is an invaluable exercise to reflect on our professional identities, the pillars of our trade, the market forces that dictate the places we work and impact compensation, and the main tasks that lay ahead to achieve national, and eventually international, recognition. It just may motivate us to further embrace change in our evolving profession and commit to work even harder and forge stronger partnerships in the advancement and professionalization of the Medical Interpreting field.

Ann-Marie is a Certified Spanish Medical and Legal Interpreter. Since 1996, she has worked in several capacities in the translation and interpreting industry-- managing translation projects, recruiting and coordinating freelance interpreters, coordinating interpreter training courses, and as an interpreter herself in clinics, hospitals and courts. She also owned and operated her own language services company and served as the Vice-President of the Medical Interpreter Network of Georgia from 2004-2010. . Currently, she works for Language Line Services as a Customer Experience Manager.

Edurne is a Licensed Psychologist, has an MBA and is a Certified Translator by the ATA. She was born in Uruguay, where she studied and worked as a Clinical Psychologist, Assistant Professor and Marketing Manager. She moved to the U.S.A. in 1997. Edurne has experience in international marketing, perinatal education and consultancy. She works as an independent translator and interpreter and belongs to several professional organizations. Currently is committed to help link technology and the lives of her colleagues in the fields of translation, medical interpreting and training.