

## Language Profession Interview

Name: Rachel M. Lunde

Profession: Applied Linguist

Number of years in this line of work: 5

Native Language: English

Other Language(s): French, Spanish

1) What is your profession?

Applied Linguists are specialists in how languages are learned. Many of them are language teachers or researchers, but some work in Language Testing, what I do at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Right now, languages play a vital role in ensuring the national security of the United States.

The FBI gathers foreign intelligence through e-mails, wire taps, and documents in over a hundred different languages. The FBI must hire translators that know both English and a foreign language well enough to be sure that those translations are right. It's important to know whether the bomb *did* go off or *will* go off before we send Special Agents in! In Language Testing, I am part of a team that measures translators' language skills to be sure that they've got the right stuff for the FBI to hire them.

2) Describe a "typical" day as an Applied Linguist.

No two days are alike. Some days I am analyzing test data to help create new, improved tests. Other days I am working with native speakers of all kinds of languages to create tests or train them how to give speaking tests. I also meet with language officials from other Intelligence Agencies to discuss issues with languages. It's a real mixed bag: teaching testing concepts, researching, traveling, and acting as a liaison with over 150 different testers from all over the world.

3) What do you enjoy about it? What do you not enjoy about it?

My job is very intellectually stimulating, and I am continually challenged to help the FBI meet its language needs. I have learned so much about different languages, cultures, and political situations around the world. I like the diversity in my work, and the collaboration with interesting people from all walks of life. The job can be stressful and demanding at times because our mission is critical, and problems arise that must be solved right away. I guess that just keeps me on my toes.

4) Do you speak any other language(s) besides the one(s) you work with?

I almost always speak English at my job, but I work with loads of different languages. Sometimes I use my French and Spanish at work.

5) What language do you think in?

Since I use mostly English, I think mostly in English. When I do get the chance to speak French or Spanish for a while, I do start to think in them.

6) What do you think helped you the most in mastering the foreign/second language(s)?  
I think two things helped me. The biggest overall help was living abroad in France and Ecuador. There is no better way to learn a language than when it is all around you and living depends on it. Also, it was such a unbelievable experience to live there; I learned so much about myself and the world around me. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The other thing that really helped me was not being afraid to try. I remember feeling silly when I first tried speak French because it sounded so different. The fact of the matter is that to get good foreign pronunciation, you are going to have to sound weird for a while. After a while, I stopped caring about how I thought I sounded and dove right in.

7) What opportunities have knowing another language provided in your career that you may not have had otherwise?

Knowing a language is a requirement for this job. There are loads of jobs at the FBI that give preference to people that know foreign languages well: translators, Special Agents, Intelligence Analysts, and more. It's not just at the FBI, but in almost every government agency. Sometimes knowing a language gets you a salary bonus, even if you don't use it for your job.

8) Do you think it is essential to learn not just a language, but also the culture(s) of the regions where it is spoken?

I definitely think knowing the culture is very important. You can't separate culture and language. Knowing culture will make learning the language easier, and make more sense. Even more, it is important for people dealing with foreign intelligence to know the culture because it gives more information that the language alone.

9) If you had the time to learn another language now, what language would it be? Why?  
That's a hard one... I want to learn so many. I would like to learn Mandarin Chinese. Because there are so many people that speak it, knowing it would open a lot of doors. I'm interested in Arabic as well. Arabic is such a critical language right now.

10) How do you think your life would have turned out if you had never learned another language?

I achieved a lot of my confidence and independence from living abroad, so I do not think that I would have accomplished as much in my life. I would not have had such a broad understanding of the world, and I wouldn't have met so many interesting people. Researchers say learning a language can expand your mental capacity, so maybe I would not be as smart.

11) In your opinion, are there more career opportunities for people who speak two or more languages?

Definitely! Having additional skills opens up doors. The way that the world is getting smaller, there is an increasing need to communicate with people all over the world.

12) What do you think you would be doing if you weren't an Applied Linguist?

I think that I would probably have studied math or physics. I like the science of language, the phonetics and the structures. Math and languages appeal to my analytical side.

13) Any additional information:

People are always so intrigued and impressed when you say you are a Linguist. I could not think of a more fulfilling job to have. My position allows me to really contribute to language theory while I am helping to keep America safe. Oh, and did I mention it pays well, too?