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TRADUTTORI, TRADITORI? INTERPRETING IN TIMES OF INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS

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This paper discusses the interpreting in areas affected by conflicts or wars. The goal of the article is to shed light on the role of interpreters as language/culture brokers and go-betweens in very specific circumstances. To achieve the purpose of this study, a literature review was conducted, which allowed us to explore the available research in the field and identify potential areas for future analysis. In our paper, the emphasis was put on some of the major and most violent conflicts since WWII. We found that specialised literature mainly focuses on locally recruited or ad-hoc interpreters who often lack training or interpreting skills and in the post-conflict period are left behind and under threat. Moreover, while performing their duties, they might be perceived by both parties to the conflict as possible traitors. Although in the majority of cases, these interpreters remain invisible, they undoubtedly represent an important element in conflict zones.
Keywords: *armed conflicts, conflict zones, interpreting, training, skills, double agents*

In war, interpreters have become
a vital intelligence asset.
- Richard Brooks

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting in conflict zones is a topic that has not yet been thoroughly explored by researchers, however, in recent years, much attention

has been paid to it not only by scholars but by the media and international organisations as well. In essence, the role of interpreters performing their job in conflict zones is like that of other interpreting professionals – to bridge the communication between different parties that speak different languages. Yet, as highlighted by T. Rosado in 2014, "The way the services are rendered and the environment where they are provided are very different from other types of interpreting. Very often they perform the work under adverse circumstances such as choppers flying over their heads, shots being fired at them, or being surrounded by wounded people crying for help" [17].

WALKING THROUGH HISTORY

In *Translators Through History* (2012) J. Delisle and J. Woodsworth mention that armies have always needed interpreters to perform a variety of functions. They would take part in determining the enemy's positions, overseeing conquered territories, making and keeping allies, negotiating with the enemy, and communicating within the same, multilingual army. Authors claim that often, interpreters would be recruited from among the soldiers who knew the languages, whereas others were civilians, including foreigners, who were employed when the army was deployed [9, p.266].

The earliest references to interpreters performing duties during wars are found in Greek literature. During their expeditions, Greeks had to deal with people of different languages, and to overcome language difficulties, they would use interpreters. Likewise, Caesar, in his account of the Gallic War, mentioned a few occasions on which he used interpreters [12]. In the crusader period, it was essential to have an interpreter-guide who could help navigate both the rugged topography of the land and the complex linguistic map of the region. Sometimes, those people were acting as both an interpreter and a soldier. Thus, the interpreters found themselves on the front line of military conflict – at times brokering peace and at other times engaging in warfare [16].

Many interpreters in the New World, during the early expeditions, were native Indians, often servants and the like. In fact, the first generation of interpreters in the New World were largely natives who were captured and trained as interpreters by explorers [6, xv].

Accounts of Napoleon's expedition to the Middle East contain numerous references to the work of translators and interpreters capable of handling both French and Arabic, while during WWI, and particularly during the negotiations to end the war, interpreters played a critical role as well. Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that in Germany, in WWII, interpreters held the rank of officers in the army, however, this was not necessarily an advantage if the interpreter became a prisoner of war [9]. When American troops fought in Vietnam, the fundamental problem existed of finding interpreters/translators to assist them. According to D. Bekke, a former US Army officer, most of the interpreters were at least part Cambodian and spoke both Cambodian and Vietnamese [8].

INTERPRETING IN CONFLICT ZONES

The conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries have been a source of demand and supply of interpreters, consequently, the armed forces' need for interpreters can change, depending on the type of war being fought [17]. Interpreters are often recruited by foreign armies because they "know" both the local language/dialect and English, the language of international relief operations, and not because they have been trained as translators or interpreters. However, such people lack both essential professional skills to perform adequately as interpreters, as well as the necessary professional ethics to support crisis management and humanitarian efforts in a stressful environment [15]. Generally, it is very seldom that interpreters in war zones are qualified, despite their knowledge of languages. In simple terms, they live in areas where professional training does not exist [13]. In Europe, unlike the Middle East, there are some bodies that provide certificates in humanitarian interpreting training. As postulated by J. Baigorri-Jalon [3], in conflict zones interpreters would be called to work in a great variety of situations: intelligence and counter intelligence activities, liaison with allied troops, logistical dealings with local civil populations, and interrogation of war prisoners. Interpreting in conflict zones involves serving people affected by conflicts and may include humanitarian and military interpreting "and sometimes medical interpreting as well [14, p. 65]. For example, between 1992 and 1995, during the Bosnian war, the interpreters were usually teachers or students

of foreign languages. Allied forces had to recruit a considerable number of native-speaking interpreters, including those with a mix of Serb, Croat, and Muslim backgrounds. Interpreters accepted their jobs, aware that they would become vulnerable to intimidation by local forces. One of the main duties of hired interpreters was participation in social patrols [4].

During the two-decade-long war in Afghanistan, approximately 50,000 Afghan interpreters worked alongside the American military. Among the services interpreters were required to provide were oral interpretation, interpretation support at military traffic control points, and assistance in screening the local population at military checkpoints. There were three different categories of interpreters: local nationals with security screening but no clearance and a salary between 10 and 45 dollars per day; US citizens with a salary between 70,000 and 140,000 dollars per year and a restricted number of US citizens working as interpreters with top secret clearance [7, p. 165]. Between 2008 and the summer of 2021, about 70,000 interpreters and their families moved to the United States after securing "special immigrant visas". According to the estimations, as many as 300 interpreters died in Afghanistan during this time while waiting for visas. As the Taliban closed in on securing the country as the U.S. withdrew, roughly 20,000 interpreters and their families were still attempting to reach the United States [11].

Regarding the Iraq War, the US hired contractors and local translators and interpreters. Because of the significant dangers for Iraqi interpreters, they often wore masks when going out on assignments. Many Iraqi interpreters came from sectarian and ethnic minority communities who were oppressed under Saddam Hussein [2, p. 84]. As in the case of Afghanistan, the US Congress originally authorised 25,000 Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqis who worked for the U.S. military. But so far only 22% of the visas have been distributed, according to the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project [21]. Nowadays, Iraqi translators continue to wait for their paperwork to be processed. The project estimates the average wait time for eligibility is about two years.

Following Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, Ukrainians, including interpreters, had to adapt to the language of war – interpreting for the training of the Ukrainian armed forces, for the training of

the medical staff and international delegations, and for the organisations providing refuge and support for those nationals who were forced to flee the conflict: they form the linguistic bridge between Ukraine and the rest of the world. Moreover, interpreting services are helping the Ukrainian government spread its message. This is especially true for Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, who has been releasing speeches regularly, both for domestic and international audiences [20]. Thus, the war in Ukraine has become a conflict defined by communication, where technical communicators and translators/interpreters impact the fight just as well as any weapon [18].

VIEWS

Translators and interpreters working in war zones operate against a particular backdrop which inevitably has an impact on their role, their experience of the war, and how they are viewed by other parties [5, p.197-198]. The adage 'traduttore–traditore', usually applied to the idea that a translator/interpreter can never remain entirely faithful to a source text/discourse, takes on sinister overtones in conflict situations. What people usually perceive in such cases is that local interpreters are still with their family and community, emotionally if not physically, while helping a foreign military force that has different interests and objectives [4]. So, interpreters and translators, are viewed as "double agents", with a dual loyalty – to two masters and two cultures. This duality, in the opinion of the locals, means that the interpreter uses the native language as a weapon to favour foreign interests. Quite often, interpreters are forced into the category of the villain or traitor. The interpreter who works for foreign forces is a villain who should be treated just like the invading army [19, p. 28].

When E. Kahane, a member of the International Association of Conference Interpreters was asked how interpreters are perceived by the Taliban and the local groups, he declared that they do not understand the concept of an interpreter, what they do, and how the job works; accordingly, it is something very foreign for them. They see someone who is acting as a go-between and who has come as part of a group and therefore must share in that group's opinions. And so, they will automatically identify them as an opponent too, no questions asked. What's more, as

soon as they begin to identify the interpreter as an enemy, their family is viewed in that way too. An interpreter's place in the community soon becomes untenable. When the groups go on assigned missions, they are left as outcasts in the zones of conflict where they worked and, of course, exposed to all kinds of potential violence from someone who may be looking to take revenge, despite them being in no way responsible for the situation [13].

PROTECTION

Conflict zone interpreting requires not only language skills but also the ability to work under pressure and hard conditions, the ability to tolerate heart-breaking and harsh circumstances, besides having decision-making skills and self-confidence. Despite this, interpreters contracted to work in conflict zones are often non-professional linguists yet play a key role in communications. Operating in high-risk environments, they are extremely vulnerable and require special protection [14, p. 65].

Therefore, K. Allen considers that interpreters who facilitate communication in conflict zones put themselves at great physical and psychological risk, and yet are mostly unknown to other interpreters, because they work in isolation from the rest of the profession. The service they provide is essential, therefore, the author strongly affirms that it is time that the profession widens its reach to officially bring them into the fold [1]. The performance of such activities in high-risk environments and their links with foreign actors has exposed several of them to direct attacks and persecution also in the aftermath of a conflict, once foreign actors leave the concerned countries [9].

Intending to regulate the profession and raise awareness on the part of interpreters, several bodies and organisations have started to enlighten conflict zone interpreters about their rights and duties and have set out to regulate their work around the world, among which, the International Association of Conference Interpreters. A report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that an interpreter is killed every 36 hours. Most of them end up in Europe in terrible conditions. "It is an international problem that needs to be tackled first and foremost at the international level. The EU also needs to engage more actively in addressing post-conflict situations. It is a question at our

doors, at our borders." "All linguists worldwide should be better protected from the vagaries of national politics, and coordinated policies are needed to solve not only the present difficulties of interpreters in conflict situations but to ensure the recruitment of others likely to be needed in the future," Linda Fitchett, Former President of AIIC, stressed during the EU hearing [10].

CONCLUSIONS

Since the beginning of civilisation, interpreters were viewed as a bridge in the intercultural communication during peace and war times. Without these professionals, vulnerable parties would have never been given a voice to be heard. Therefore, their role, in particular in war or conflict settlement is very complex. Interpreters engage in providing their services in conflict zones and peace talks being aware of the perils that await them. They are vital to any effort undertaken to resolute a conflict; therefore, they shall first and foremost, be well-trained, enjoy international protection, and their rights be observed.

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