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On agency, witnessing and surviving
Interpreters in situations of violent conflict

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29.1 Introduction

Interpreters have long played a key role in situations of violent conflict. From military field operations to humanitarian and diplomatic activities, interpreters have “a direct or indirect impact on how a war is waged and on how it is remembered” (Inghilleri and Harding, 2010, p.166). Yet their role and influence is not always well understood. Recent conflicts in the Middle East under the banner of the “War on Terror” have generated large-scale language support needs and brought the figure of the interpreter to public attention, most notably in relation to post-conflict asylum applications in countries such as the UK, US, France, Denmark and New Zealand. Despite some special visa immigration programmes, many continue to endure the risk to life. Since 2012, a coalition of prominent professional interpreter and translator associations led by Red T has been advocating for greater protection for linguists under international law. However, such efforts are often hampered by pervasive myths about interpreting as “unskilled labour” and inadequate planning practices at the institutional level.

This chapter focuses on interpreter agency in conflict zones and its (re-)presentation in the public domain. It is designed to support better understanding of the complexities and contingencies of interpreter mediation in these situations and the way in which these are conveyed to a wider audience. It firstly explores findings of research in translation and interpreting studies published since the early 2000s, providing insight, through contextualised examples, into tensions that commonly arise in planning and executing multilingual operations, primarily, but not exclusively from a military perspective. The examples show how limited understanding of communication needs and poor planning shape practice on the ground.

Secondly, I examine the way in which interpreters have come to public prominence over the same time period, drawing on the review of the literature in the first section to critically appraise (re-)presentations of interpreter mediation in conflict zones. The data include interpreter memoirs, interviews and blogs, military memoirs and other publicly available media reports, as well as fictionalised accounts of recent conflicts in the Middle East. These serve as a basis for examining the extent to which common tropes about the interpreter’s role are
reproduced or challenged in the public domain, and the way in which the specific vulnerabilities of interpreters working in conflict zones are disseminated.

The analysis is anchored around an understanding of the duality of the interpreter as witness and survivor, understood in the context of embodied action in war. Witnessing takes several forms: it denotes awareness of the body in action and of the self as located in a particular temporal, ideological and geographical space (reflection-in-action). It is also used to denote reflections-on-action in post-conflict phases. Survival is understood in bodily and psychological terms and intimately connected to processes of witnessing.

Emphasising the duality of role in these terms is significant in the sense that the physicality and dangerousness of war and violent conflict places interpreters in a position of what might be termed radical visibility, whether bodily, interactionally or politically. Interpreters in more conventional in-person public service encounters are seen to operate along a continuum of visibility–invisibility/intervention–non-intervention; they may make cultural clarifications, coordinate others’ talk (Wadensjö, 1998) or withdraw, figuratively speaking, into the background (see also Angelelli, 2004). Interpreters in the war zone operate along a similar continuum but are also confronted by the fact that their bodily presence generates an enduring set of compromises to which they permanently need to attend for their own safety and that of others. This creates an existential and ethical burden both during and beyond the end of hostilities, a burden that is arguably poorly understood among institutional interlocutors and employers of interpreters.

29.2 Interpreters in conflict zones – a translation and interpreting studies perspective

A growing body of literature has emerged in translation and interpreting studies in recent decades on the theme of translation and conflict, particularly violent conflict. However, as Salama-Carr (2007, p.1) observes, conflict has long been central to contemporary discourse on translation and interpreting, reflected in the linguistic tensions and institutional power relations present in encounters between translator and translated.

In interpreting studies, particular attention has been given to accounts of interpreting in conflict and post-conflict situations in different periods of history (e.g. Baigorri Jalón, 2011, 2014, Elias-Bursać, 2015, Footitt and Kelly, 2012, Roland, 1999, Torikai, 2009). In 2016, a special issue of *Linguistica Antverpiensa* edited by Lucía Ruiz Rosendo and Clementina Persaud on historical perspectives on interpreters and interpreting in conflict zones shed light on the particular challenges faced by scholars grappling with the paucity of references to interpreters in historical records. Oral history methods employed for example by Torikai (2009) and Baker (2010a, 2010b, 2012) are helping to shape future records by foregrounding the interpreter’s voice, but are understandably limited to conflicts in the recent past.

The legacy of the conflict in the early 1990s in the Middle East (the first Gulf War) and the events of 9/11 and subsequent military operations (commonly subsumed under the “War on Terror”) has driven much of the recent scholarship in the field, accompanied by new theoretical and methodological approaches. The opening up of debates on ethics, norms and agency made possible by applications of Bourdieu’s field theory (Inghilleri, 2005, 2010) and socio-theoretical and socio-constructivist theories in narrative theoretical paradigms (Baker, 2006, 2010), has broadened our understanding of interpreters’ relationship to power and the extent to which they shape activities in the conflict zone and beyond. More specifically, concepts of self and other, freedom and constraint have served to support re-evaluation of interpreter impartiality and role (Inghilleri, 2010, p.212), raising questions
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about established interpreter role profiles, since those associated with conference and public service interpreting do not map easily onto interpreting activities in situations of violent conflict (see Kelly, 2012).

In the following section, I examine the findings of studies on translation and interpreting in recent conflicts in the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia in order to illustrate the complex interplay between interpreter agency and role. The section is organised around five themes that cut across the studies: language planning, interpreter recruitment and training, motivation, role hybridity and interpreter neutrality.

29.2.1 Language support planning, recruitment and training

Ill-informed institutional approaches to planning language support provisions are frequently highlighted in the literature on translation and interpreting in conflict zones. The phenomenon is not limited to military operations, however. Ozolins’ (2010) examination of the various context-specific factors that impact on the organisation of interpreter and translator provisions in public service domains draws attention to the problems of institution-led, as opposed to profession-led approaches to interpreter provisions. The negative impact of institution-led approaches to the outsourcing of interpreting for the legal services sector in England and Wales is a case in point.1

In a series of articles on interpreting in conflict zones since 9/11, Rafael (2007, 2012) explores the institution-led approach and ideological backdrop to the planning of US military interpreter provisions. His analysis highlights translation as a form of weaponisation and securitisation understood in the context of counter-insurgent warfare (i.e. warfare that focuses on population protection (2012, p.2)). These themes feature in a speech made by President George W. Bush in January 2006 at a conference at the State Department, in which the importance of translators is highlighted as a means to shore up national security.

Rafael (2007, p.239) describes how Bush’s speech makes an explicit link between the learning of a foreign language and deference to another culture, and observes that the positive attributes of “care” and “appreciation” Bush purports to promote are undermined within the same speech event, as the following excerpt shows: “When somebody takes time to figure out how to speak Arabic, it means they are interested in somebody else’s culture […] We need intelligence officers who when somebody says something in Arabic, or Farsi or Urdu, know what they are talking about” (p.240). Rafael shows how “somebody” has a dual function: the first mention suggests genuine interest in interpersonal and intercultural contact, whereas the second suggests disinterest by listening for content only. He concludes that the promotion of translation as a monopolistic vehicle of communication serves to “ensure us that the other stays where it belongs” (p.240), but does not consider specific operational instances in which it may be warranted.

In a later article, Rafael (2012) draws further attention to the problem of institution-led interpreter provisions and demonstrates the extent to which the relationship between weaponisation and translation is significant for understanding interpreter recruitment practices in the US military. Citing a US Department of Defense document from 2005, he observes how translation is explicitly conceptualised as part of a critical weapons system. The “weapon” in this case takes the form of a so-called Language-Enabled Soldier who is positioned as “[an ideal substitute] for interpreters” (2012, p.5). For Rafael, this approach evidences a profound lack of understanding about communication and processes of language acquisition. The very rudimentary language skills acquired in training appear at odds with the sophisticated range of conversational practices in which soldiers are expected to engage. According
to Rafael (2012, p.5), the Language-Enabled Soldier effectively becomes obsolete during the training period; such is the limited likelihood of interactional success in the field.

Scholarship on conflict and peace-keeping in the former Yugoslavia highlights a different set of challenges faced by planners in the recruitment of interpreters and translators. Dragovic-Drouet (2007), for example, highlights the problem of planning language support provisions in a situation in which interpreting and translation was not necessary between the parties in the conflict itself, but rather for the large number of international media organisations and different military units brought in to support peace-keeping operations. Although large numbers of individuals came forward to offer their services, Dragovic-Drouet observes that most (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) were untrained and not able to carry out the work to an appropriate standard; others resigned after a short period, unable to cope with the nature of the work. In the later phases of the conflict, attempts were made to professionalise language services (e.g. for NATO-led operations), which led to aptitude testing (Askew and Salama-Carr, 2011, Jones and Askew, 2014). Some individuals who had worked for several years as interpreters were deselected after failing to prove sufficient language competence, and struggled to find other work.

Studies by Baker (2010a, 2010b, 2012) on the British military in Banja Luka also address questions of planning and recruitment. She observes (2010b) that some of the ambiguities that emerged in the conflict (e.g. due to some parties labelling it as an ethnic or ethno-religious conflict) impacted on interpreter recruitment processes. For instance, interpreters with mixed family backgrounds before the conflict found themselves being classified in one of three ethnic groups (2010b, p.160). Moreover, in marking tests undertaken by applicants wishing to interpret for the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), certain aspects of idiolect were negatively perceived and marked down by a marker from a different ethnic background, and this regardless of the fact that the interpreter’s idiolect might be appropriate for the area in which s/he would be operating (2010b, p.160). A later article by the same scholar (2012) highlights the frequent conflation of proficiency in English language with proficiency in interpreting skills, a conflation that is widely reported by agents across the translation and interpreting industries and helps to explain why short-cuts in recruitment often occur.

29.2.2 Motivation to interpret

The reasons interpreters come forward to work in such volatile and dangerous situations are many and varied. In the Iraq conflict, motivations included the interpreter’s ties to the nation, the pursuit of a particular social or political cause or, most commonly, economic necessity (Inghilleri, 2010, p.185). Although locally-recruited interpreters in Iraq and Afghanistan have often been positioned in media narratives on the “us [coalition] side of the conflict” (Baker, 2010, p.207), the decision to interpret in the first place is largely contingent on the sociopolitical realities of the individual agent, raising issues of interpersonal trust. The well-documented accounts of interpreters putting themselves forward to work with coalition forces only to provide false information (Marting, 2004) or carry out acts of insurgency draw attention to the fact that the social positions of translators and interpreters in conflict situations often remain obscured (Rafael, 2007).

Motivation is also influenced to some extent by future job prospects. The scholarship on conflict in the former Yugoslavia, for example, has opened up discussions among interpreter training establishments about how best to support interpreters in developing human and social capital to facilitate their work during the conflict phases and in converting or leveraging that capital as peace returns and redevelopment begins. Baker (2012, p.152)
describes how cultural capital acquired by interpreters over the course of their work was subsequently “not easily redeemed in any ‘market’”; however, in terms of human capital, training opportunities in advanced translation and interpreting were scarce, thereby limiting progression within the profession. The InZone project set up by the University of Geneva to provide remote multilingual training in conflict zones is a direct response to this issue, aimed at improving competence in the field and supporting career progression (see Moser-Mercer et al., 2014).

29.2.3 Role hybridity and role boundaries – interpreters-as-fixers

The lack of effective recruitment processes and sudden demand for large-scale communication support suggest that an ad hoc and reactive approach to interpreter provisions is reasonably common, at least in the early phases of conflict. This approach extends to interpreters recruited to work for media organisations in conflict zones. Palmer (2007), for example, discusses the “uses to which translators are put” (p.14) in the context of western media operations in the Iraq conflict in the early 2000s, highlighting the extent to which competence in interpreting and translating is often less valued than an individual’s personal contacts. The interpreter-as-fixer, which is the focus of Palmer’s analysis, is an epithet widely ascribed to individuals who serve as interlingual mediators in news interviews, but who also arrange interviews and even directly engage in reporting. Palmer highlights the potential bias in media reporting resulting from interpreters who shape a journalist’s view of a situation and provides insight into techniques used by (in this case French) journalists to identify potential misinformation. Examples include asking the same question in different ways, checking the reputation of the fixer and their track record.

It is important, however, to make a distinction between journalists embedded with army units and “unilaterals” (Fahmy, 2004, p.15) in the field since their use of and contact with interpreters is likely to differ, i.e. due to operational constraints and the level of interpreter autonomy on missions; the issue of bias is nevertheless of significance to both. Fahmy’s account – to which I return later – discusses the support he provided to humanitarian efforts in addition to his work as an interpreter with journalists from the LA Times in Iraq. This shows a form of boundary crossing not commonly present in other interpreting situations, but that is consonant with perspectives in interpreting studies that foreground engagement, activism and social responsibility (Boeri, 2008, Drugan and Tipton, 2017).

29.2.4 Interpreter neutrality

Role hybridity in conflict zones emerges as a result of planned recruitment practices (e.g. the interpreter-as-fixer), but also as situations evolve in which the interpreter’s own survival and that of others is at risk. In some cases, the interpreter needs to engage in physical combat to survive. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in much of the extant literature the problem of neutrality is a recurrent theme. What is noteworthy is the extent to which the specific characteristics of interpreter mediation in conflict zones challenges conceptualisations of interpreter neutrality deriving from civilian service contexts. This has led to a more nuanced understanding of the ethical issues facing interpreters. In this section, I discuss two examples of military and locally-recruited civilian interpreters to illustrate some of the changing perspectives on interpreter neutrality.

Snellman’s (2016) study on interpreter neutrality in relation to military interpreting marks an attempt to move beyond conceptualisations of neutrality as an attribute of
professionalism (linked to trust) commonly found in civilian interpreting. This relates to
interpreters working for a military organisation and not recruited locally. A key point of
departure for the analysis is based on the fact that fellow soldiers can view the military
interpreter’s manifestation of neutrality as a betrayal of trust. This apparent contradiction is
explained in part by military tradition, according to which service personnel are regarded as
being loyal to and belonging to one party only (p.66). Snellman explains that effective mili-
tary working relations hinge on trust in one’s fellow service personnel and that such trust is
likely to be eroded if an individual seeks to operate in a neutral middle zone.

Snellman analysed interviews with 14 Finnish military interpreters 2012–2013 using a
grounded theoretical approach and a four-dimension conceptualisation of neutrality: physi-
cal, professional, linguistic and cultural. He finds that while interpreting activity is fre-
quently conducted according to an impartial model of communication, this is not true of all
circumstances where the unidirectional flow of information is sometimes prioritised over
interaction of the type promoted in studies of dialogue interpreting in public services (see
Wadensjö, 1998). This is evidenced in one of the interpreter interviews and echoes elements
of Bush’s speech discussed earlier:

A soldier is on someone’s side anyway and if I am a military interpreter then I’m on
the side of this person. So a normal interpreter would interpret everything both parties
have to say. A soldier doesn’t have to […] I didn’t have to interpret everything to the
clients. But as long as the interpreting and information flowed in our direction there
was no problem.

(Snellman, 2016, p.273)

This quote invites reappraisal of Rafael’s assertion that such an approach serves to “keep
the other where it belongs”; in the interview above, the interpreter’s words may be viewed
as less ideologically loaded and more pragmatic in orientation compared to Bush’s com-
ments, but they still pose questions with regard to ethics and the treatment of the other in
multilingual encounters.

As a contrast to military interpreters, locally-recruited civilian interpreters form the focus
of Stahuljak’s (2009) study that discusses the work of the European Community Monitor
Mission (ECMM) in the former Yugoslavia, tasked with monitoring ceasefires negotiated
and the protection of minorities’ rights. The study focuses on the interplay between the
conceptualisation of interpreters as agents of translation and agents in the war. Emphasis is
placed on the discursive violence performed by and to the interpreters in question, and on
problematising translation from the perspective of agents who are unable to stand outside
their own history.

Stahuljak’s analysis draws on interpreter interviews with psychologists (gathered by Ivan
Magdalenic 1992–3) that were designed to identify the nature of trauma interpreters had
been subject to in order to provide support in dealing with its effects. Despite the politically
neutral stance of the organisation, the (volunteer) interpreters appeared to view the role of
the interpreter as a “privileged site” through which their agency could be exercised and the
voice of Croatia promoted (p.398). Indeed, they report readily engaging in such actions:
“Regardless of the official function [of the interpreter], I try to play the role of an unofficial
representative of the Republic of Croatia, I explain the situation in this part of the world to
the monitors” (p.401).

The process of “switching” (the term used in the interpreters’ accounts) between interpret-
ing, explaining and even advocating for a particular perspective about who is the aggressor
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and who is the victim in certain circumstances can lead to deep moral conflict for the interpreters, especially when they see that no change ensues. Interpreters reported “switching” at will in order to intervene with information about their perceived truth about a situation. Stahuljak couches these distortions in terms of discursive violence: in other words, for some interpreters, to interpret “faithfully” means to do violence to those witnesses. As a result, the distortions are expressed as examples of the interpreters bearing witness to the violence that was done to them.

The researcher had no access to actual transcriptions of interpreter-mediated interventions at the ECMM and so the analysis relies on reported behaviours only. For Stahuljak, however, these examples are significant to the extent that they appear to suggest that translation is not a mere act of interlingual transfer, but rather it constitutes a speech act in its own right and a form of interventionism (see Stahuljak, 2010). As an interesting point of contrast, Askew’s study of interpreters recruited to work for the Language Service under the auspices of the NATO-led multinational stabilisation force (SFOR) in Sarajevo 2000–4 reveals that the interpreters were explicitly required to represent the organisation and not their separate communities (Askew and Salama-Carr, 2011, p.104). Again, how this was operationalised in practice remains unavailable to the researcher for scrutiny.

Finally, Inghilleri’s (2008) study on interpreters at the detention facility of Guantánamo Bay in Cuba challenges the universality of interpreter neutrality as an ethical goal, calling for situation-based approaches to interpreter action. Drawing on the role of the linguist in interrogations involving individuals deprived of legal rights and the protection of international law, Inghilleri shows how linguists “played a pivotal role in the interrogations [...] participating fully either as translators or in order to physically or verbally insult or mock prisoners in their own language” (2008, p.216). Invoking Levinas’ idea of the ethical relation obtained between the Self and the Other, Inghilleri stresses the tension inherent in Levinas’ work, which makes it difficult for individuals to decide “which Other among all others’ a person is responsible for in situations of multiple and conflicting loyalties” (2008, p.216), concluding that ultimately, Levinas’ privileging of ethics over politics is unsustainable.

The findings of the studies highlighted in this section help to illustrate the challenges in considering interpreter mediation as a universal phenomenon (Diriker, 2004, Torikai, 2009). This poses obvious questions for those seeking to offer greater protection to interpreters. The findings show that there is an inherent instability in interpreter role profiles in conflict zones that can only reasonably be addressed by having a deep understanding of context and also a willingness to be more flexible in relation to “what makes a professional interpreter” (Askew and Salama-Carr, 2011, p.104). Relatedly, Guo’s (2015, p.11) critique of the Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators and Interpreters and Users of their Services (2012, co-produced by Red T, the International Association of Conference Interpreters and the International Federation of Translators) calls into question the privileging of “impartiality” under the list of interpreter responsibilities, suggesting that the complexities of role and context are over-simplified. Given that the guide intends to speak to interpreters across contexts the approach is understandable, but Guo’s criticism is fair. It suggests that country-specific conflict zone field guides may be needed in order to take account of the geographical, organisational and ideological contexts in which interpreters are inscribed. Regardless of the form such guides take, it is important to acknowledge that developments in thinking about neutrality are much enriched by the challenge to the common trope of the interpreter as an “in-between” found in Stahuljak’s work and reflected in other scholarship in translation and interpreting studies (e.g. Tymoczko, 2003).
29.3 Interpreters as witnesses and survivors

In this section, I return to the duality of role of the interpreter as witness and survivor to set out the theoretical influences on how these concepts are defined and applied in the analysis. The concept of the translator and interpreter as a witness is not new to translation and interpreting studies. Recent intersections between translation and memory studies (see Brownlie, 2016, for example), have led to the conceptualisation of translators as secondary witnesses who are all too often left out of the testimony-preserving process. Exploring the translation of Holocaust testimonies, for example, Deane-Cox (2013) seeks to open a discursive space to generate a “more definite subject position” (2013, p.311) for the translators involved, while acknowledging that such subject positions are not necessarily neutral. The evidence of translator influence on the testimony-preserving process provides important insight into questions of empathy, identification with the testifier, and the ethical relation between translator and events from a distant past.

Stahuljak’s (2009) work on the conflict in Croatia discussed earlier foregrounds the corporeality of war and problematises it in the context of interpreter experience. In contrast to Deane-Cox’s work on written translation, the agents of translation in Stahuljak’s account are acting contemporaneously and are inextricably bound to their role as witness in the war by virtue of having a shared background with the testifiers. This dual role presents a different set of questions with regard to empathy and the interpreter’s identification with the testifier because in this study the interpreters-as-witnesses are subject to a form of structural violence. In other words, the conventional structure of interpreting (in which the interpreter is viewed as having limited participation rights and involvement) is imposed on the context in question in a way that seeks to neutralise their role as a witness: “interpreters who volunteered to translate in order to testify are denied the very possibility of testimony” (2009, p.400).

Although these issues are very particular to the context of Stahuljak’s study and the agents in question, they speak to the wider issue of embodied action in war in ways that can usefully inform our understanding of the interpreter-as-witness and the interpreter-as-survivor. The ethical implications of witnessing are, however, not fully teased out in Stahuljak’s account, and in this respect, the work of Peters (2001) provides a complementary perspective. He describes witnessing as “an intricately tangled practice”, and one that “raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception” (2001, p.707). His description extends to consideration of the ethical relationship between the witness and the situation through the assertion that “to witness an event is to be responsible to it” (p.708). How interpreters and their interlocutors conceive of this responsibility and respond to it is a question that remains to be addressed in interpreting and translation studies.

On one hand, then, the concept of witnessing is concerned with embodied action and the interpreter’s reflection-in-action. If witnessing an event means to be responsible to it in some way, then we need to be clear what we understand by an “event” and its temporal boundaries. In this respect, witnessing can denote reflection in action in the wider context of the unit of war and reflection in the moment of a specific action. The self-reflexivity involved in witnessing combat situations and the unfolding of conflict over months and years places different cognitive burdens on interpreters that have significance for their linguistic choices as well as the way in which they (re-)negotiate their position in relation to the demands of the conflict situation.

Reflection-on-action is the second type of witnessing that informs the analysis and concerns the transmission of the witness experience to others. The particular characteristics of
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embodied action in conflict zones poses a challenge to the witness in terms of how to convey it and whether it is even “sayable”. Dyvik (2016) explores this theme in an examination of the military memoir as embodied text. The impossibility of communicating experiences is often linked to the claim that embodied experience in spaces such as war zones produces “specific forms of cognitive and corporeal knowing” (Hockey, 2009, p.481, in Dyvik, 2016), which make them inherently unknowable to readers who are positioned outside that experience.

Dyvik focuses on the relationship between the author and reader of so-called “flesh witness” accounts (following Harari, 2009) and seeks to challenge the “unknowability” of such accounts for the researcher, asserting that they place an ethical responsibility on readers to listen to what they cannot understand. In the study that follows, I pose a similar question about readers of artefacts on conflict and interpreting who are faced with the double challenge of understanding what it means to interpret and what it means to be bodily present in situations of extreme danger and complexity.

29.4  (Re-)presentations of interpreter mediation in the public domain

This section presents selected findings from the analysis of a dataset of publicly available documents to gain insight into how the corporeality of war impacts on processes of witness (in interpreter-mediated events, and in the account-giving process subsequent to events) and how the consequences of witnessing are articulated by different interlocutors and enter the public domain.

The data include interpreter memoirs, blogs, military memoirs, media reports, and several works of literature. The inclusion of literary pieces in the data is important because of the greater likelihood of being read by the general public than memoirs or blogs. One of the works, The Yellow Birds (Powers, 2012), was winner of the Guardian First Book Award in 2012 and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2013. Literary works also provide an important point of contrast to the so-called “flesh witness” or first-hand accounts presented in the memoirs and blogs, and allow for a broader perspective on how interpreters are presented in popular culture. The two novels discussed below were selected on the basis that one was written by a war veteran and the other by an author without direct experience of the conflict the novel is based on.

The analysis focused on the key themes highlighted in the empirical studies reported on in Section 29.2 and a keyword search to identify thematic clusters. Additional recurrent themes across the data include relationships between interpreters and their military interlocutors, interpreter working conditions in field operations and interpreter visibility.

29.4.1 Fictional accounts – bonds, bodies and the illusion of connection

This section discusses two fictionalisations of recent conflicts in the Middle East. They both capture behind-the-scenes aspects of interpreting that serve to underscore the ontological insecurity of the interpreter in ways not commonly present in first-hand accounts. Attention to colour, smell, the juxtaposition of everyday life – such as it exists – with the presence of the military help to position the interpreter in a broad physical and ideological landscape. The novels draw attention to the working time of interpreters in military organisations, which contrasts markedly to that of interpreters working in highly circumscribed civilian service encounters where they usually have spaces for downtime between encounters.
The first novel, *The Yellow Birds* (Powers, 2012), can be categorised as a pseudo-flesh witness account. It is the story of a US soldier’s tour of duty in Iraq told in the first person and written by Kevin Powers in 2012, a former US army machine gunner. A civilian interpreter features early in the story as a plot device that serves to humanise death in light of initial references to the faceless thousands that have been reported killed in the conflict. The opening scene sees the interpreter, Malik, asserting his rootedness in the local area; an assertion that is physically asserted through the decision to remain masked and emotionally confirmed through his reference to hyper-local knowledge such as the name of a lady who grew flowers in a nearby field:

At daybreak on the first day our interpreter, Malik, came out onto the flat concrete roof and sat next to me where I leaned against the wall. It was not yet light, but it almost appeared to be because the sky was white the way the sky is when heavy with snow. We heard fighting across the city, but it had not reached us yet. Only the noise of rockets and machine guns and helicopters swooping near vertical in the distance told us we were in a war.

[...]

“Mrs Al-Sharifi used to plant her hyacinth in this field”. He spread his hands out wide and moved his arms in a sweeping motion that reminded me of a convocation. Murph reached for the cuff of Malik’s pressed shirt. “Careful big guy, You gonna get silhouetted”. “She was this crazy old widow”. He had his hands on his hips. His eyes were glazed over with exhaustion.

The gulf between the interpreter and soldier that exists despite the strong bond of friendship in adversity is evocatively articulated when Murph says: “I tried to imagine living there but could not” (p.10). As the scene unfolds, the interpreter’s expansive gesturing to his military interlocutors seems to invite death through reckless exposure to the enemy beyond, a death that was soon to follow. The interpreter’s demise, however, leaves the soldier, Murph, unmoved. The character claims that he “was not surprised by the cruelty of [his] ambivalence then” (p.11), describing the interpreter as “an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to my continuing life” (p.12). In this novel, the interpreter serves as witness to the chimera of bond between interpreter and soldier, with the mask worn by the interpreter a symbol of the separation between the two lifeworlds.

The second novel is by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya. Published in 2013, *The Watch* (Roy-Bhattacharya, 2013) is a fictional account of US Army experiences in Afghanistan. The opening scene sees an interpreter positioned as a central figure in the action. The story is structured around different agents’ perspectives on the events of the opening scene (including the interpreter’s). The plot centres on an episode in which a female character, Nizim, injured in an attack that had killed her family, comes to bury her brother whose body is being held at a nearby fort. The exchanges with the fort’s military occupants (the US army) through the interpreter about the release of the body for burial reveal Nizim’s contempt for the interpreter whose accent is taken as a sign of particular set of attitudes and hostility.

The novel is noteworthy because of attention to details of speech and interaction, which tend to be glossed over by interpreters in their first-hand accounts. For example, the interpreter-mediated exchange between Nizum and the US officers early in the story emphasises the interpreter’s use of the third person and attempt to project a voice of authority (through a scarf that conceals the face) and exert power over the female interlocutor. This fails to have the desired impact: “My sense of him is of someone trying to play an adult, manifestly out
of his league” (p.10). Nizum plays on this perceived weakness as she is body-searched for a bomb and makes an appeal to the interpreter to intervene: “You are a believer aren’t you? You know this is wrong” (p.17).

As the conversation unfolds and Nizum is subjected to an aggressive line of questioning, the interpreter shifts to a more conciliatory position and enters into side conversations: “you would do well to listen to [the officer]” (p.22). The female character notes the interpreter’s efforts to diffuse the aggressiveness of the queries “with some well-turned phrases” (p.22). The interaction opens up to an unmediated monolingual exchange in which the interpreter explains that he is working with the Americans because the Taliban had killed his family. This account counters Nizum’s misplaced assumptions about the interpreter’s allegiances, based largely on his accent.

The reference to accent sheds light on the potentially problematic intra-community relations of which interpreters are part. Civilian interpreters are recruited from among local populations, but also from elsewhere, which means that in any one geographical space different linguistic practices and cultural understandings are likely to intersect. This observation, which echoes real world practices, adds a new dimension to the concept of witnessing in terms of the proximity/distance of the interpreter to the local population.

In *The Watch*, the plot device of a single event viewed from multiple perspectives is especially conducive to exploring the interpreter’s ambivalent position and vulnerability. In this case the interpreter’s embodied action takes on particular resonance for understanding the role of the flesh witness as a listener and as an agent of the war. The multiple voices and positions of the interpreter are articulated in ways that tend to be absent from the memoir and help readers who are unfamiliar with the interpreter’s role to understand the potential diversity of the interpreters in the conflict zone and the consequences for intra- and intercultural communication.

### 29.4.2 Military memoirs

This section discusses two military memoirs written by former US army personnel. In contrast to the fictionalised accounts above, these texts provide a direct account of interpreter mediation in combat situations. In these accounts, the relationships between interpreters and their military interlocutors are heightened due to the contingencies of combat; at the same time the locally-recruited civilian interpreter’s position at the periphery of military work is highlighted.

*Outlaw Platoon* by Sean Parnell (with John R. Bruning) (2012) is a memoir chronicling the experiences of a US army platoon operating in the Bermel Valley in Afghanistan, close to the border with Pakistan 2006–8. The role of the interpreter is foregrounded from the start as a significant figure in the work of the platoon. The account provides insight into the ebb and flow of the locally-recruited civilian interpreter’s working life, from high intensity and high visibility liaison interpreting with military interlocutors and locals, to intelligence monitoring and communications work in periods of combat.

The two interpreters employed to work with this unit had evidently worked with the military for a while before the arrival of the platoon. The main interpreter Abdul’s value to the platoon was described in terms of his linguistic flexibility and ability to communicate in the many languages and dialects spoken in the region. We learn that Abdul’s motivation for interpreting was the death of his father (also an interpreter working on a US Special Forces), killed by the Taliban, which explains his refusal to cover his face and determination to allow others to know what he was doing.
After a lengthy passage about a meeting with the local military commander in which the interpreter’s interlingual and intercultural expertise is acknowledged, the narrative moves to highlight the well-documented tension between the interpreter as an outsider and part-insider. Abdul was denied access to a seat in an armoured vehicle when such seats were in short supply and allocated to serving US servicemen as a priority, prompting the author’s aside: “He’s with us, but he’ll never be one of us” (p.51).

Abdul’s family had received a direct threat as a result of his interpreting activities and when his request for assistance to check on the family or even for him to visit was denied for security reasons, he left of his own accord to make the journey back to his home village. He was killed on his return journey to the military base. The author expresses regret following Abdul’s subsequent death at the minimalist treatment his burial received compared to a soldier, and the in-between status of the locally-recruited interpreter is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

Abdul had been trapped between two cultures the moment he elected to avenge his father’s death. Never one of us, no longer able to fully trust his own people or be trusted by them, he’d existed in a never-never land where we returned his loyalty with constant reminders of his second-class status.

(p.69)

Later in the account, the second interpreter, Yusef, who was generally viewed by the platoon with greater suspicion, is involved in an interaction involving a traumatised child and medic:

In stark contrast to my medic, Yusef’s tone was clipped and devoid of sympathy. For a second I wondered what he was actually saying to the boy. Once again I wished Abdul was here. Trusting a ‘terp to translate accurately without injecting his own agenda or machinations into a conversation requires trust. With Abdul, such a leap of faith was easy.

(p.271)

It is interesting to observe that the officer projects a particular form of interaction onto the scene, assuming that the interpreter’s approach was inappropriate in the circumstances. Given that this exchange happens some months into the platoon’s mission, the insight suggests a lack of intercultural understanding between the officer and interpreter. Unlike the interpreter, Abdul, who had been killed, the account provides no background insight into Yusef and no credible explanation is provided as to why he aroused more suspicion among the soldiers. The only indication lies in the description of Yusuf’s interpretation into English as “clipped” and “professional”, delivered “matter of factly” (p.274). His demeanour on relaying the account of a village elder, who had just found his mutilated grandson’s body at the side of a road was couched in terms of “his face a mask”.

There is no speculation on the part of the author that this approach may have been a deliberate attempt by the interpreter to maintain some distance from his military interlocutors, or indeed as a self-protective mechanism to help him interpret in the most emotionally testing of circumstances. However, towards the end of the account, the interpreter was found to have orchestrated moves to thwart operations and even the assassination of the other interpreter Abdul (pp. 315–18), providing some insight into the challenges of managing suspicions and insurgency from within the military unit. Here the performance of the interpreter can be conceived as an example of a discursive act of defiance.
The second memoir, *Twice Armed* by R. Alan King (2006), Lieutenant Colonel with the United States Army Reserve (USAR), recounts experiences in Iraq in 2003–4. In the introduction to the account, the author’s inability to communicate was highlighted both directly (he spoke some Arabic) and in relation to the accompanying American interpreters who struggled to understand the Iraqi dialect. He suggests that the communication problems impacted more on the Americans since the local population seemed to understand what the American interpreters were saying – a reversal of the situation described by the military interpreters in Snellman’s (2016) study. It is interesting to note that issues of dialect had not been given priority in interpreter training, and further corroborates Rafael’s assessment of US military practices in relation to the lack of linguistic preparedness of personnel.

The author of this account covered a very wide geographical area in the course of his tour of duty and met nearly three and a half thousand Arab sheikhs recognised by the former regime, providing insight into the scale of language support needs. In one reflection on the work of a civilian translator, a male aged 50, he asserts that he uses the label “translator” (by which he means interpreter) “loosely” (p.25) for two main reasons: firstly, that the individual in question engaged in more tasks than “mere translation” (p.25), and secondly, because for the Iraqis he worked with “it was a derogatory term”.

In a single sentence, the author draws attention to the vulnerability associated with the role of the interpreter but also presents a contradictory assessment of the role. On one hand, the act of translation is seen as a low-skilled job. On the other hand, by crediting the level of credibility achieved with the sheikhs to the “impeccable translation” and to the translator’s counsel on culture and attitudes, the author highlights the wider ramifications of having a person who is highly skilled in the role. The separation of intercultural and interlingual elements in the translator’s skills set is unhelpful in the sense that it fails to convey a coherent message about the role to the reader. However, given that the author spoke and understood Arabic to a reasonable level and could, therefore, translate things for himself, we may infer that his attitude to translation and interpreting stems from the fact that translation is not an exceptional part of his own role.

Issues of witnessing and survival for interpreters are brought into sharp relief later in the account against the backdrop of anarchy in Baghdad that followed the collapse of the government in 2003. I have already commented on the interpreter’s actions as recounted by the author (see Tipton, 2011), but I revisit the episode here in the context of the discussion on (re-)presentation of the interpreters and the concept of witnessing.

The chaos generated by poor infrastructure, abandoned weapons and presence of hostile forces (e.g. Fedayeen squads – paramilitaries, loyal to the Saddam regime and who conducted counter-insurgency operations) presents a sharp contrast to the dusty plains evoked in the fictionalised representation discussed earlier. The interpreter engages in direct fire as the army vehicle convoy comes under attack: “Both Salih [the interpreter] and I continued to fire” (2006, p.58). Seconds later, there is more fire on the convoy: “At that moment I heard another explosion and looked back to see the other translator hanging out of the vehicle shooting back towards the ambush” (p.58). On asking the translator to stop shooting, the author comments “He [the translator] looked at me like I was crazy, and started talking nonsense, trying to rationalise shooting back. I wasn’t in the mood to listen” (p.59).

The use of the word “nonsense” is noteworthy in this account since it reveals aspects of the author’s power in relation to the interpreter; in the example above, it is used to comment on the lack of judgement of the interpreter in contrast to other soldiers. The fact that the interpreter was even shooting appeared unremarkable to the author, although the account does make it clear that interpreters were not routinely armed. Despite being a heat-of-the-moment...
matter, the episode raises legitimate questions as to how the military managed expectations about interpreter involvement in combat activities.

29.4.3 Interpreter accounts

Interpreter accounts of experiences in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have proliferated due to the possibilities offered by new technologies. However, researchers have consistently struggled to gain access to individuals to interview them about their experiences due to these individuals’ fears of reprisal. A recent project led by doctoral students at Kent State University in the US has gathered together numerous texts written by interpreters about their experiences in the field, and I acknowledge the access to this resource in developing the dataset for this section. The examples selected for discussion here concern two interpreters based in Iraq and are taken from a published memoir and an online blog, which make it possible to contrast the experiences of a media-related interpreter and a locally-recruited interpreter who worked for the US army.

The first witness account of Fahmy (2004), an interpreter employed by the LA Times in Iraq in 2003 provides limited insight into witnessing in the form of reflection-in-action in the moment through asides such as “I watched the man’s pupils for signs of credibility” (p.112). The account foregrounds the interpreter’s desire to be a force for good and support humanitarian activities in addition to his work as a media interpreter. The interpreter is employed as a “translator-fixer” and moves very fluidly between the different tasks.

The account of embodied action highlights the productive working relations with the other journalists from which the sense of professionalism and devotion to truth-telling emerges. In other words, it is clear that the interpreter is impressed by the dedication to journalism in such challenging circumstances to the extent that his own actions are impacted by a sense of duty and responsibility, not just to his journalist interlocutors, but to the local populations in spite of the physical danger often faced. In the absence of any formal interpreter training, the interpreter takes his moral cues about embodied action from significant others in the field. For instance, the willingness to continue to work despite feeling exhausted suggests a sense of duty to an individual journalist (Mark), but also to the need to allow the local populations to have their voice heard: “Mark was hunting for more information as he pushed me to concentrate just a little longer before we called it a day” (p.68), and again later: “Almost done for the day Mark and I decided to extract more insights from the people about their future expectations” (p.108).

The account shows a heightened awareness of bodily movement through conflict and constant reorientation of action to the crisis facing local populations in a way that illustrates a sense of responsibility to the events witnessed. In this sense, the different temporal frames of reflection-in-action intersect as the interpreter’s lens moves between events at the national level and micro-instances of interpersonal interaction. The fragile confidence shown by the interpreter in supporting humanitarian activities perhaps stems from his position of relative comfort and privilege “[I] retreated to my air conditioned Pajero” (p.78), but is also expressed in ontological terms: “I had survived my own private moments with death in this war. Yet, strangely I did not fear death” (p.117). These comments present a very stark reminder to the reader of the realities of the interpreter’s position, but also of the scope for personal choice in negotiating power relations and positions within fast-moving and complex events.

The blog of a young interpreter recruited to work with the US army in Iraq provides a very different perspective on the interpreter’s role in the same conflict. The posts are written...
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in a manner that reflects the dynamism of prose written as though to a close friend. The purpose of the blog seems to be to educate and draw attention to “The Story of Interpreter Shitty Life” (sic), as much as it is a mechanism for expressing emotional responses to the nature of the work. The replaying of conversations, complete with slang and profanities, captures instances of reflection-in-action to an extent not found across the other interpreter accounts in the data. A post from June 2008, is illustrative of the style of the blog and outlines the comprehension difficulties of a fellow interpreter and brings to relief the consequences for personal safety and security of inappropriately prepared interpreters:

I remember we were doing security operation in a city west of Iraq the MET team leader told his interpreter to call the IA’s (Iraqi Army) through the radio and telling them to stay away from that house which we were getting fire from, cuz the air will bomb it … the interpreter didn’t understand what his team leader told him, but I was there and I heard what the team leader said … so the interpreter called the IA’s and told them “hey the Americans say get in the house and detain the bad guys inside the house”. I heard him and I was like what the fuck r u tellin them???? Do u wanna kill them u stupid? he said “that what the team leader said!!” I said “call it off#, then I asked the team leader what u just told him? he said “tell the IA’s to be away from the house cuz the air will bomb it.”. then the terp understood that he translated wrong and he almost kill IA’s team by translating mistake … then he called the IA’s again and told them “run far away from the house ASAP the air coming to bomb it.”

(Sam, Blogpost, June 2008)

The same post also speaks to some of the wider themes about planning and training and the need to suppress the voice of the witness: “there is a fact about terps and it’s we have to be LIARS so we can still survive” (Blogpost, June 2008). An indication of the scale of interpreter provisions is also brought home in the blog through a reference to an early experience of flying out on a mission to a remote location and entering an “interpreters’ tent” where he encountered interpreters who had been injured in the course of their work.

There is an underlying fear expressed in the blogposts that contrasts quite markedly with the Fahmy’s account discussed above. The interpreter is careful to redact the blog to maintain certain details out of the public domain, but several reflections on action help to show how the interpreter managed his response to fear. For instance, the injunction to interpreters to remove their masks is recounted in an entry from November 2008 and provokes the interpreter’s ire. It is viewed as a deliberate attempt to have interpreters killed. The strong sentiments are not without precedent since an earlier post from 2007 mentions “I signed the disloyal contract”, suggesting an ambivalent relation with his employers from the start of his employment.

These two sources are not presented as representative of the interpreters involved in the conflicts in question, but they may be understood as prototypical to the extent that their accounts reflect issues flagged in both the empirical studies and in other documents examined for the purpose of this study. It is striking that across the first-hand accounts examined overall, that the nature of witnessing (as in reflection in specific moments of action) is generally speaking not captured well, or rather, as vividly as one might anticipate given the extreme circumstances. This may be due to the fact that the memories of reflection-in-action fade quickly and are relegated to the back of the mind as part of a sense that the job has been done and the individual has lived to work another day. What these accounts do provide, however, is an insight into the tension between different forms of witnessing and how this links to the interpreter’s survival (physical and psychological).
29.5 Conclusion

This chapter foregrounds interpreting as embodied action in conflict zones as a complement to studies in which the body is much less prominent in conceptualisations of witnessing. The physicality of war requires the civilian interpreter to adopt specific subject positions, which means their role needs to be seen as evolutive and requiring high amounts of self-reflexivity.

Interpreters enter into the role knowing the risks and knowing that they may be hurt or even killed in combat operations, but there is scope to manage some of the risks (after-hours/off-duty) and recognise that there may be specific instances where the interpreter’s involvement extends to operating the machinery of war to survive. We may legitimately ask whether there exist structures to support interpreters who experience this type of activity, whether in training and or in terms of post-mission support. The reaction of the author of Outlaw Platoon to the interpreter’s decision to continue shooting in the attack on the vehicle convoy in Baghdad, suggests an ambivalence towards the interpreter, which is troubling if it is indicative of other service personnel’s attitudes. This is open to further research.

It seems that better protection can only be implemented if the lived experience of interpreting in conflict zones is more fully understood and available for scrutiny. This includes the lived experience of witnessing and surviving and the way in which interpreters conceive of their responsibility to the events witnessed. In this respect the institution-led approaches to interpreter provisions urgently need to be reviewed and jointly re-assessed with the input of professional interpreter and translator associations, and interpreters who have direct experience of the field.

The discussion of selected artefacts shows that there is good evidence in the public domain of how concepts of witnessing and survival impact on the interpreter’s linguistic and interactional choices, evidence that does not gloss over interpreters’ role or simply reproduce tropes. This is heartening and likely to support what I would argue is a productive reading of the accounts by individuals who have no experience of translation or interpreting, or indeed of conflict situations. The accounts vividly bring to the reader’s attention the scale language support needs and the associated contingencies involved in the recruitment process. Having an ideal role profile may support planning and training; however, the different ages, life experiences and levels of education highlighted in the discussion show that institutions and other organisations working with interpreters in such contexts need to retain a degree of flexibility of approach and adjust support mechanisms as needed.

Despite suggesting that the artefacts support a productive reading of interpreter mediation, we need to recognise that the impact of these texts is likely to be limited, due to their limited readership. If institution-led approaches are so often found to be lacking, then enhancing understanding at the institutional level is a necessary first step. Guo’s critique of the approach to the interpreter’s responsibilities in the Conflict Zone Field Guide mentioned earlier suggests that there is greater scope for collaboration between academics, professional associations and institutions in building the evidence base and case for change.

Notes

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References

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