Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East

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The figure of the interpreter in conflict is as interesting as it is elusive to the rest of the profession and academia. One of the regions that has caught the attention and the interest of scholars is the Middle East. The literature tends to focus on one specific category – locally recruited interpreters – and the application of different theoretical concepts to their role and consideration by the parties involved, and does not delve too deeply into the intricacies of the specific role of other categories of interpreter in this context. Also, the existing narratives do not always frame this role through the typology of the conflict in which it is developed. This paper identifies narratives included in the literature that represent interpreters working in armed conflicts in the Middle East in order to examine the different existing categories. The paper then draws on the results of a qualitative study carried out with staff interpreters at an international organisation with the aim of completing this categorisation. Our focus will be on the characteristics of the different categories of interpreter in terms of their involvement in the different stages of the conflict, their positionality, working conditions, status and recognition by the parties involved in the conflict.

Keywords: interpreting, interpreters, armed conflict, narrative, Middle East

1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an increasing interest among scholars, interpreters and professional associations in the role of interpreters in conflict zones and scenarios, and this topic has become a focal point of discussion. Various authors have conducted studies to examine the role played by interpreters in conflicts in different regions and scenarios (e.g., Baker, C. 2010a, 2010b; Collier 2010; Dragovic-Drouet 2007; Footitt and Kelly 2012; Inghilleri 2008, 2009; Juvinal 2013; Ozawa 2008; Palmer 2007; Rafael 2007; Stahuljak 2009; Takeda 2009). This academic interest is due to certain factors, such as the greater visibility and more frequent
reporting of interpreters who work in zones of conflict in the present day – compared to in the past, when they tended to be invisible because they were not recognised as such –, and the increasing need for linguistic mediation in these zones (Askew and Salama-Carr 2011). The analysis of interpreting in conflict zones is not devoid of difficulties. This could be in part due to the fact that the relations between the different stakeholders tend never to be simple and the backdrop of conflict has an inevitable and imponderable effect on the parties involved, including the interpreters, which in turn has a direct influence on their own experience and the way the interpreters are viewed and described by other stakeholders (Baker, M. 2010). According to Footitt (2010, 111), “warfare is different to any other form of human endeavour” in that it involves a large number of people in “situations in which materiality […] is of an order unlike any other” (ibid.). In this scenario, the interpreter is usually embedded in the communicative situation, in contrast to other types of scenario. Not all interpreters working in conflict zones are professionals however (Inghilleri 2010). Thus, the fact that an interpreter is working in a conflict does not necessarily mean that he or she has professional experience as an interpreter or linguistic mediator. This is the case with most local interpreters, who are usually recruited because they know the local language and one or several local dialects, as well as the language of the foreign army or the international agencies or organisations involved (Allen 2012; Baigorri 2011; Moser-Mercer and Bali 2008). They are not, however, hired because they have received training as interpreters in those languages, which means that they may not have acquired the necessary skills or competences to interpret adequately beforehand. Moreover, one might wonder whether the traditional conception, adopted by international and national professional associations, of what makes a professional interpreter can be applied to the interpreter who works in conflict zones (Askew and Salama-Carr 2011), in that the particular positionality of the interpreter and the interaction backdrop might affect other factors, such as ethics, neutrality and accountability. The reported differences between local interpreters and other types of interpreter, such as conference interpreters, have even led some scholars to discuss whether the former can actually be called “interpreters” (Baigorri 2003). Indeed, depending on one’s perspective, local interpreters have some characteristics that would make them interpreters, and others that would prevent them from being defined as such.

However, and in contrast to these untrained interpreters, there are also trained interpreters who mainly work as staff or freelance conference interpreters for an international organisation and go on a mission to the field. These interpreters are a largely unknown quantity. One might wonder whether and to what extent they face similar issues of positionality, accountability, neutrality and ethics. This reflection gives rise to the present study, which seeks to add to the knowledge of interpreting work and categories of interpreters in conflict zones.
2. Conflict, armed conflict and war

There is a direct relationship between the practice of interpreting and the context or environment in which it occurs (Inghilleri 2003), so, in order to analyse the role of interpreters, one has to first establish the specific context in which they work. The term “conflict” is too broad as a contextualisation, and we therefore consider it necessary to narrow the scope of the context. In the present study, we will focus on armed conflicts as defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Project, that is, a “contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both where the use of armed force between the two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. Of these two parties, at least one is the government of a state” (Gleditsch et al. 2002, 618, 619). For Small and Singer (1982), the creators of the Correlates of War (COW) project, war is defined in terms of violence. For them, war is impossible without violence, and the taking of human life is the primary and dominant characteristic of war. However, defining a category of armed conflict by the number of deaths might be an overly simplistic approach. In our study, even if we do use the aforementioned definition of armed conflict, we will also use Clausewitz’s theory of war.

Clausewitz (1989) and Sharma (2015) define “war” as the continuation of politics/policy by other means, a political activity in which violence is employed as a tool to achieve certain objectives, whereas “warfare” is defined as the actual fighting. Both Clausewitz (ibid.) and Sharma (ibid.) relate changes in the nature of war to changes in the nature of society. In the Clausewitzian model, there are three types of war in the spectrum: limited, total and absolute. Limited war implies no need to render the opponent helpless, and the actors recognise others as equals. In a total war, the level of violence is higher, as well as the degree of social mobilisation. At the other end of the spectrum, in absolute war, the purpose of war and the purpose of warfare are the same. The objective is to disarm the opponent, to destroy the opponent’s capacity, and as such is the dialectical opposite of limited war. The goal of military operations in this case is the destruction of the opponents’ capacity for self-defence, rendering them unable to continue the struggle regardless of their will to do so (Bassford 2016). The stakes are what differentiate these types of war, and the higher the stakes, the more total the warfare. In absolute war, the stakes are higher because “the categories of institutions being altered become rapidly more and more central to the social order” (Sharma 2015, 338). As a result, resistance is greater and displacement levels are higher.

Many contemporary ontological, public and conceptual narratives on the role of the interpreter in war focus on the Middle East, particularly Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. For Gleditsch et al. (2002), the Middle East was, from 1946 to 2001, the most conflict-prone region, as measured by the probability that a given
country will be in conflict. The situation there may be characterised as similar in the present day, with the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, and the perpetuity of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. One could argue that these wars are absolute, if the Clausewitzian spectrum is used. To illustrate this absolute nature, we can quote Bassford (2016, 15), who states that “the 2003 US invasion of Iraq employed a strategy of military annihilation to disarm Saddam’s state, permitting the imposition of political objectives as extreme as any in history”. We consider that, in order to analyse the role of the interpreter in a given armed conflict, it is important to take into account the category it falls into and, in the case of a war, the type of war it is. Thus, in the present study we will focus on the wider concept of war put forward by Clausewitz, and will analyse the specific role of the interpreter in absolute wars in the Middle East. We will further delimit the scope and focus on one of the four war-related situations in which languages come into play put forward by Heimburger (2012, 47), this being on the ground, “when hostilities occur in a place where a different language from that of the troops is spoken”.

3. Interpreters and interpreting in armed conflicts

To our knowledge, there is no general taxonomy or classification of interpreters who work in armed conflicts in general, and wars in particular. Not only is an analysis of the different types of interpreter lacking in the literature; the same also applies to the analysis and classification of, on the one hand, the different stages of the conflict and the types of situation where these interpreters develop their work, and, on the other hand, the stakeholders that they help to build bridges between. This could be due to the fact that the very definition of what a war-related scenario is appears to be vague and elusive, in that the boundaries that divide these war-related situations from other types of situation tend never to be clear. In this vein, Inghilleri and Harding (2010, 166) argue that even if some interpreters work “at a greater distance from the immediate physical violence of war”, these contexts and the tasks performed therein have a direct impact on the development of the conflict and on how it is recalled.

The literature mentions different war-related scenarios in which interpreters work: on the frontline accompanying the military (Inghilleri 2009; Juvinall 2013); accompanying journalists on missions abroad (Palmer 2007); asylum hearings (Inghilleri 2003); interrogations at facilities set up by intelligence institutions or the military (Baker, M. 2010); court procedures; interacting with the military peacekeepers and the local population on peacekeeping operations (Baker, C. 2010a, 2010b; Bos and Soeters 2006; Persaud 2016; Stahuljak 2009); mediating between the troops or military observers (United Nations Military Observers...
[UNMOS]) and the local population on UN peacekeeping operations (Alves 2015); UN Commissions of Inquiry, fact-finding missions and other investigations involving local governments, special envoys, representatives of victims’ associations and NGOs; UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) rapid response teams; post-conflict scenarios, such as the ICTR (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) or the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia); and intelligence gathering activities (Footitt and Kelly 2012). It is worth noting that the type of interaction, the tasks carried out and the parties that are involved depend directly on the conflict itself and the region in which it takes place. For example, in the Bosnian and Afghan conflicts, Bos and Soeters (2006) mention, in the context of the military, different situations in which the interpreters worked according to their level of language skills: daily reconnaissance and social patrols for those with the least developed skills; demining missions for those who had mastered technical vocabulary; and assistance to the liaison officer, the civil-military cooperation officers and the commanding officers for the most advanced and experienced interpreters. In addition, Inghilleri (2010) mentions raids, combat foot patrols, vehicle patrols, ambushes, bomb-clearing, and base security missions when referring to the situations in which interpreters accompanied the military in Iraq.

Regarding the different types of interpreter, Allen (2012) tries to bring order to a group that at first sight appears to be poorly defined, classifying them into the following subgroups: military linguists, local or civilian interpreters, and interpreters working for international news agencies or journalists (also called “fixers”). These three groups are also evoked by other authors (Inghilleri 2009; Inghilleri and Harding 2010). Inghilleri (2009) draws this distinction when referring to the three different types of translator working in the war zones of Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. She specifies two types of translator working for the US military – contract translators and US military translators – and a third category of local Iraqi “fixers” working with international journalists.

Given the difficulties that a general classification of interpreters in war situations entails, in this study we set out to define the different categories of interpreter who specifically work in the Middle East region. By doing so, we endeavour to gain a better understanding of interpreters’ different positionalities, their status and their recognition, this involving a look at the nature of their relationship with the stakeholders. In order to study these concepts, we will try to answer the following research questions:

– What are the different categories of interpreter working in absolute wars in the Middle East? In what stage(s) of the conflict does each category of interpreter work?
- What are the characteristics that define these categories in terms of positionality?
- How does this positionality influence neutrality?
- Are there any differences between the categories in terms of status and recognition by the other stakeholders?

4. Research methodology

The discussion of the different categories of interpreter is based on Baker’s narrative approach, “narrative” meaning a story that we live by and that helps us to understand the world, to comprehend the role of interpreters through how they are narrated by others (Baker 2006). In this context, we will analyse the conceptual narratives on interpreting in conflict zones in the Middle East, meaning by “conceptual narrative” the “stories and explanations that scholars in any field elaborate for themselves and others about their object of enquiry” (Baker 2006, 39). This approach will be used for the first three types of interpreter in our taxonomy: military language specialists; local interpreters recruited by the military; and UN language assistants.

For the fourth type, that is, staff or freelance conference interpreters, the results of an exploratory study undertaken by the authors of this paper will be presented. Since very little scholarly research and very few narratives focus on the work carried out by these interpreters, and in order to reframe their work more effectively, we conducted a study using a qualitative-driven approach. Qualitative and, to a lesser extent, quantitative data were collected through a survey including Likert-type and forced-choice items, and many open questions. The survey was administered through LimeSurvey, with the first section looking at autobiographical data and the remaining sections addressing the other aspects of the research questions (see Appendix 1). Given the difficulty that access to staff or freelance conference interpreters entails, we contacted a staff interpreter who had worked in conflict zones in the Middle East on many occasions. This first contact allowed us to access other interpreters who had worked in the field, and after obtaining informed consent, we could eventually survey eight staff and freelance interpreters who had worked mainly in conflicts in the Middle East in the context of an international organisation.

For the closed questions, the information was analysed with the LimeSurvey statistical tool. Given the limited number of participants, we decided to present the results using numbers and not percentages (see Section 5.4). For the open questions, a directed content analysis according to Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) distinction was carried out and salient topics were identified separately for each
answer. The activity as a whole went hand in hand with an ongoing comparison and examination of topics across the participants. The analysis of the data allowed us to create ontological narratives that describe this category of interpreter (see Section 5.4). By “ontological narrative” we understand, following Somers and Gibson’s (1994) definition reflected in Baker’s (2006) work, personal stories that the interpreters tell about themselves, about their own personal history and experience. It was possible to create such narratives in that the participants gave very detailed answers to the open questions, providing us with a wealth of information.

In short, conceptual narratives on the role of three categories of interpreters – military language specialists, local interpreters recruited by the military and UN language assistants – and ontological narratives on the role of a fourth category – interpreters at an international organisation – were created with the ultimate goal of contributing to the meta-narrative about the role of interpreters in conflicts in the Middle East. By “meta-narrative” we understand an overarching story that unites smaller themes and individual stories “in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history” (Somers and Gibson 1994, 61).

5. Defining the categories

In this section, we will describe the categories of interpreter working in war-related scenarios that we have identified in the narratives: military language specialists; local interpreters recruited by the military; UN language assistants; and staff and freelance conference interpreters.

5.1 Military language specialists

From a purely historical perspective, the use of military language specialists who are subject to modern professional interpreting standards is a relatively recent phenomenon (Baigorri 2011). According to Allen (2012), armies are investing heavily in recruiting and training these military language specialists in the use of potentially “conflictive” languages, such as Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Urdu and Farsi, as well as in the use of Spanish, Portuguese and French. There are even high-ranking members of the military who act as mediators in conflict scenarios, both among linguistically diverse troops or with local authorities, politicians and armed groups (Bos and Soeters 2006). Bos and Soeters (ibid.) also indicate that high-ranking officials tend to mediate in communicative contexts where the stakeholders are educated people who have a fluent knowledge of major Western European languages. In the case of conflicts in the Middle East, some military translators have trained to be translators or interpreters through a personal interest in Arabic. It
is worth noting, however, that all these mediators are first and foremost soldiers. This leads them to a different position compared to local interpreters in terms of being trusted by the military, ethics applied and protection received, along the lines of the meta-narratives that describe their role. In this vein, Inghilleri (2009) describes the different ethical position adopted by military interpreters in contrast to locally recruited interpreters when she refers to two soldiers who acted as interpreters and translators in Guantanamo and Iraq. According to the military interpreters’ accounts, they opted for adopting a more neutral role and following orders in spite of their reluctance to do so. This led them to justify their own responsibility through an appeal to a code of practice regarding hierarchies of power.

5.2 Local interpreters recruited by the military

The second group refers to interpreters hired to work in conflicts without belonging to the army. This group is mainly made up of untrained interpreters who have been recruited – very frequently through opaque means – because they speak English and are from the area, even though they have not received any formal interpreter training. They are also recruited because of the psychological, economic and political knowledge that they possess, this forming part of the wide expertise that they are understood to have (Inghilleri 2010). They usually serve as liaisons between the local population and foreign troops. They are mostly local citizens, but they may also be migrants or refugees who are citizens in the army’s theatre of operations. In the case of the US military, they might be native speakers of the local language but residents in the United States (Inghilleri 2009, 2010; Juvinall 2013; Palmer 2007), that is, they are no longer local residents. They are usually identified by chance or circumstance, do not always have a good command of the foreign language, and the motivations and rationale behind their decision to work as interpreters are manifold.

This group of interpreters is the most numerous and also the one that is reported to face the most difficulties: they are often mistrusted by the parties involved in the conflict, be it the military or the local population; they do not always receive adequate protection; and the tasks that they have to perform are not always well delimited and described (Inghilleri 2010). Along these lines, and from a conceptualisation of context perspective (Baker 2006), it is worth examining the impact of the interpreter’s latitude or agency on the relations of power created between the parties involved. As suggested above, it sometimes appears that these interpreters are frequently understood to be victims of the system, since they find themselves in a disadvantaged position in the relations of power that emerge between them and the other stakeholders, which might be the military, for example. However, less is said about the power that they themselves hold in a conflict. Part
of this power derives from the fact that they are the only actors who have access to both/all of the working languages, with the exception of those cases in which they are monitored.

### 5.3 UN language assistants

This group is made up of civilians who work on the ground as mediators between military personnel and civilians in the context of United Nations peacekeeping operations, the so-called “language assistants”. Alves (2015) highlights the fact that the context in which these assistants work is very different from the peace negotiations where international accords are signed between leaders from different nations at a hotel, a military base or even at the UN headquarters. The latter are characterised by their visibility, in that they reach a large part of the world population through the international media (Edwards 2002). In contrast to this setting, language assistants work in much less visible environments. Alves divides them into two groups: one that represents civilians coming from the troop-contributing country (TCC), and another group that is made up of local civilians who are hired by the military or the mission itself in the theatre of operations (in the latter case they have been working for the mission for a long time). Even if the people involved in the mission are required to have a basic knowledge of the local language to show respect for the local population, this knowledge is usually really very basic. Therefore, language assistants are considered to be very important because they are highly proficient in their use of both the local language\(^1\) and an international language (one of the official UN languages). They are considered to be a crucial actor in consolidating the success or failure of a peace mission. They are used because there are no professional interpreters working with some of the very specific pairs of languages or dialects, and, even if there were, local assistants would have a greater knowledge and understanding of the local culture.

Language assistants sign a contract for a specific period, and in order for this contract to be renewed, they are assessed by the immediate supervisors who are working with them. There is a recruitment procedure that takes into account their qualifications, proficiency in the working languages, years of experience, analytical and problem-solving skills, capacity to work quickly and accurately, courage and powers of persuasion, and lack of any cultural or religious hindrance, which is considered by Alves to be the most difficult requirement to meet; with all else being equal, women are given priority. Language assistants (LAs) perform other

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1. The local language is so important that it is used as a co-working language if it is not already one of the UN working languages, which are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.
functions apart from interpreting between UN representatives and local leaders and citizens, such as translating relevant documents for the mission, coordinating and scheduling meetings, preparing minutes and correspondence, maintaining filing and archiving systems, providing administrative support, accompanying UN long- and short-range patrols, assisting in the implementation of sensitisation programmes, familiarising military personnel with important points of contact (POCs) and helping to prepare the area for them, and performing any other duties as required. However, expectations and realities diverge in that most LAs have very basic linguistic skills in their foreign language, do not have previous experience as interpreters and have received a very basic general education. The lack of formal interpreting training in language assistants leads to many problems, since they can miss or change significant parts of the information given. This entails risks for the military and civilian personnel involved because of the LA’s high level of accountability; also, when an LA is used there are risks involving personal reprisals, and the non-observance of neutrality and impartiality, as well as potential religious convictions, ideological and political beliefs, ethnicity, motivation, personal involvement, confidentiality and poor communication skills (Alves 2015).

We could therefore argue that this group of interpreters shares common features with local interpreters working for different armies. However, there are differences, one of the most salient being that, in the case of LAs, the UN publishes a series of standards on the use of LAs, included in a specialised training manual for military experts on peacekeeping missions. In this manual, LAs are introduced as non-professionally trained interpreters, ambassadors of the local community and influential in this community given their high level of education compared to their fellow citizens. Military experts are asked to follow some guidelines in order to facilitate the work of the LA, such as providing written information and materials, briefing him/her about the event and the exact role that he/she is expected to play, being aware of the existing security problems and informing the LA accordingly, and paying attention to the needs of female LAs. The manual presents a series of challenges faced when working with LAs, such as the possible misunderstandings and misinterpretations that could emerge. One might wonder, however, how useful the manual actually is in the field, since the fact that the document exists does not necessarily mean that users resort to it.

5.4 Staff or freelance conference interpreters

This last group includes interpreters who work mainly for international organisations and who possess the necessary interpreting skills in that they have studied interpreting and/or have ample experience as conference interpreters, as well as proficiency in their working languages. In this section, we will present the results
of the study that was carried out in order to shed light on the role played by this particular group of interpreters.

The profile of the interpreter who goes on a mission to the field – as represented in the answers to the survey questions – is homogeneous in terms of age, origin, professional experience, training and language combination. Thus, most of the respondents are over 40, all of them come from Middle Eastern countries – Palestine (3), Jordan (2) and Egypt (3) –, and most of them (7) have more than 20 years of experience as interpreters, with the exception of one respondent who has been working as an interpreter for between 10 and 15 years. Arabic is the A language of all the participants, with the main B language being English and the main C language French. Four of them have received specific undergraduate or postgraduate training in interpreting, while the other four hold a degree in another field. However, they have not usually completed specific studies for interpreting in conflict scenarios. This particular result is in line with other studies carried out with the participation of local interpreters (see Bos and Soeters 2006; Kelly and Baker 2013), and supports Allen’s (2012) assertion that there is little specific training for interpreters working in conflicts, and that the necessary knowledge and skills may be acquired through experience. Even experienced interpreters, such as the participants in our survey, have to acquire expertise in the field. They all have in common their participation in conflicts that have taken place in the Middle East, such as those in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq. Most of them (5) have ample experience as interpreters in conflicts (more than eight years), and the rest have been working in the field for one year.

The participants consider the work of the interpreter in conflicts to be useful, in that it is interpreters who overcome language barriers and help ordinary people (rather than the elites) to explain their experiences, and in that their proximity to at least one of the parties enables different views to be reflected in a more detailed and representative manner.

Regarding the modalities used in the field, consecutive interpreting with notes is the main modality mentioned, followed by consecutive without notes. Sight translation, simultaneous interpreting, chuchotage and bidule (simultaneous interpreting without a booth) are not frequently used in the field. As regards the difficulties that they face, participants mention the environment in which they interpret, dialects, terminology, acronyms, proper names and understanding the conflict per se. Given these difficulties, they attach great importance to preparation and documentation, although they also highlight the difficulties related to preparing for interpreting in the field due to the unforeseeable nature of the work and the lack of materials. For these interpreters, it is of the utmost importance to have background knowledge of the conflict, a knowledge that has to be acquired during the preparation process before going to the field.
Interestingly, most of the interpreters (7) believe that when working in a conflict they are both cultural and linguistic mediators. As such, they consider that interpreters must have specific knowledge of the cultures of the languages they are interpreting, because more often than is readily apparent the interpreter is helping two or more parties from different cultures to communicate with one another. They also underscore that knowledge of the cultural context prevents errors from arising due to ignorance of the local culture and traditions; that being able to interpret body language and other non-verbal communicative gestures can resolve misunderstandings in a tense situation; that in conflict situations interpreters must give greater priority to accuracy, which is only possible if they understand the culture of the interlocutors; and that sometimes the interpreter has to explain specific aspects of one culture to the other party.

With regard to training, most of the respondents (7) believe that interpreters in conflicts in the Middle East should have complementary specialised training in law and economics, human rights and diplomacy. However, they consider that not just any interpreter is able to work in conflicts in the first place. When asked why, they reply that interpreters in conflicts must be people who: can control their emotions and remain calm and discreet at all times; are able to manage personal frustration and disappointment; have experience of interpreting and a very acute awareness of the realities of the conflict; are able to establish limits in order to avoid merely being used as an instrument by one of the parties; are strong and healthy; master their working languages perfectly and are well prepared for specific situations; are sensitive to cultural traditions and religious protocol; and are firm with regard to working conditions and team safety. Likewise, psychological fortitude is highlighted, as interpreting in a conflict can be a traumatic and stressful experience. Half of them also consider that some of the interpreters currently working in conflicts are not prepared or qualified for the job because they lack training and are unreliable, and that sometimes the best qualified interpreters do not want to participate in a mission or are unavailable.

Most of the interpreters in the survey (7) consider that the current training in interpreting schools does not qualify interpreters to work in conflict situations. They note that for this kind of interpreting, there needs to be more than just training. Experience, visits by future interpreters to the conflict zone(s), and performed simulations, should all be required. Along these lines, they think that interpreting schools should provide modules and/or classes relevant to interpreting in conflict zones.
6. Discussion

Descriptions of the role of interpreters in the Middle East tend to focus on the interpreter who is locally recruited by national armies, such as the U.S. army in Iraq or Afghanistan. Fewer narratives describe other types of interpreter, in particular those who work for UN peacekeeping operations or for an international organisation with a field mission. The latter carry out their work in a different stage of the conflict, as they usually go into the field during the phases of de-escalation, settlement and post-conflict as defined by Brahm (2003) and Kriesberg and Dayton (2017). The other three categories of interpreter are present in the field in the previous phases of emergence and escalation as well. If we use Kriesberg and Dayton’s (ibid.) conflict cycle to represent where each category of interpreter performs his/her work, the following framework emerges (see Figures 1 and 2):

![Conflict Cycle Diagram]

Figure 1. Kriesberg and Dayton’s conflict cycle (2017, 7)
Overall, the results of this analysis of the different types of interpreter working in war-related scenarios in the Middle East show that interpreters can encounter very specific working conditions, and that “their actions do not necessarily fall into the categories that we usually find in the current professional interpreting model” (Guo 2015, 11).

The profile of staff or freelance conference interpreters who go on field missions differs from that of the local interpreters. Their narratives are valuable because they can compare their work as a conference interpreter to their work in the field, and provide accurate comparative descriptions of both domains. These are not the only features that distinguish them. The locally recruited interpreters and the narratives depicting them in conflicts in the Middle East may be framed in terms of belonging to a specific ethnic group potentially considered as the enemy, and therefore distrusted by different actors involved in the conflict (Baker, M. 2010; Packer 2007). By contrast, staff and freelance conference interpreters – whose identities presumably are not constructed in the same way as local interpreters –, are initially and generally considered to be more reliable and trustworthy interlocutors. This is due to the fact that they already work for and represent the organisation itself rather than their communities, an observation that aligns with what Askew and Salama-Carr (2011) describe when referring to the interpreters who worked for the Language Service created by the NATO-led Multinational Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These interpreters might not encounter the same difficult situations as their local counterparts, such as being refused visas (Juvinall 2013) or dismissed and distrusted by government representatives (Baker, M. 2010). One could argue that they are not usually categorised
in the narratives as part of the enemy group – even if most of them speak the language of this group. Also, the notion of “enemy” in the context of an international organisation would make no sense. Moreover, the extremist concepts of “villain” and “victim”, and “friend” or “foe” (ibid.), or the perception of the interpreter as a “homo sacer” \(^2\) (Beebee 2010), would not apply to interpreters working for international organisations inasmuch as they are considered actors embedded in an organisation. These interpreters have probably better assimilated the protocols and norms of trust, and since they are not so easily perceived as belonging to either “us” or “them” (Baker, M. 2010), the pervasive sense of mistrust that characterises the interactions between interpreters and other stakeholders is not as palpable. Consequently, one could argue that they enjoy better protection when going into the field and do not face the same hostilities in their countries of work, origin, and return, unlike the experiences of local interpreters who have worked in conflicts in Iraq (Inghilleri 2009; Juvinall 2013) and Afghanistan.

Regarding neutrality, one could argue that their positionality as interpreters coming from and embedded in an international organisation makes them more aware of the need to be neutral, and to behave as a mere mediator between the parties. They do not allow themselves to be as selective in their communication on the interventions of others. The question of neutrality affects relations of power. Interpreters could in fact leverage power over the other stakeholders due to the fact that they are fluent in both languages and both cultures. For those working in/for international organisations, one could expect they would not take advantage of this power.

Neutrality is related to the task that the interpreter performs. The participants in our study argue that they engage in mere linguistic and cultural mediation, in contrast to local interpreters, who are asked to perform a myriad of tasks tangentially related to the interpreter’s main role (Jacquemet 2005; Takeda 2009). They therefore have less latitude to exercise the different types of gatekeeping put forward by M. Baker (2010), such as the suppression of personal narratives or the deselection of potential interviewees and venues. It is also important to note that on issues such as protection or safety, the interpreters who took part in this study state that on most occasions interpreters receive protection and their services are accepted by all sides. Interestingly, their status and identity as interpreters for an international organisation might contribute to defining their right to adequate protection.

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\(^2\) Beebee (2010) follows the definition of “homo sacer” proposed by Agamben (1998) according to which “homo sacer” is applied to “large groups of people [...] who are neither punished nor protected by the laws of any state” and who can be killed by anyone without any consequence (Beebee 2010, 296). Beebee goes on to refer to the Iraqi interpreter as a person who has become a “homo sacer”, that is, an outlaw.
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protection. Another clear difference between the interpreter groups from the outset is motivation. Interpreters from an international organisation go to the field as part of their job at this organisation, while locally recruited interpreters work as interpreters mainly for financial reasons.

All of these factors – language proficiency, solid interpreter training, a sense of impartiality and accountability, motivation, a settled identity and the protection received – have an impact on the way these interpreters carry out their work and lead us to conclude that this group is a distinct category of interpreter.

In spite of these differences between locally recruited interpreters and staff interpreters at international organisations, they do share one and the same challenge: a lack of documents. Kelly and Baker (2013) state that the lack of materials is due to issues related to confidentiality and trust; Persaud (2016), for her part, notes conclusively that interpreters usually receive a haphazard collection of materials instead of documents relevant to a meeting. Be that as it may, the inability to adequately prepare for assignments constitutes a common obstacle, and is mentioned by interpreters in several studies. Also challenging is the important need for background knowledge when confronted with a protracted conflict in the Middle East; interpreters must be aware of associated religious, political and socioeconomic intricacies, historical evolution of the conflict, and past developments, in addition to information related to a specific mission.

In terms of cultural mediation, a number of relevant skills must be mastered by the interpreter (Taft 1981) for use while mediating between cultures – a fact borne out by our comparative study. Contextual (document and experiential) familiarity is also essential, and corroborate the theses of Takeda (2012) and Bos and Soeters (2006) who propose that interpreters acquire extensive knowledge about the conflict history and dynamics, the situation of the local population, and relevant cultural and formal customs. Indeed, the act of interpreting is always “embedded in wider social and cultural practices” (Baker 2006, 321) that are of utmost relevance in conflict scenarios. One could argue that all groups of interpreters have to adapt their work to the cultural idiosyncrasies of the region in question, including adapting their speech for the parties involved in order to be able to interact. Bos and Soeters (2006) describe how interpreters in the Bosnian and Afghan conflicts felt the need to rephrase the questions and remarks put forward by the military, and adapt the “low context” culture of the military to the “high context” culture of the population; in high context culture, communication is less direct and explicit, and some information has to be learned from non-verbal language and “from what is not said” (264). In the present study, the survey respondents stated that in conflict situations interpreters must give greater priority to accuracy, and that this was only possible if they understood the culture of the interlocutors. It could therefore be argued that the conception of neutrality and non-engagement that characterises
the work of the conference interpreter changes in the field. As noted by Baker
and Maier (2011), interpreters tend to justify their decisions in other ways when
working in the field; they reflect more carefully and consciously on ethical behav-
iour through an examination of their values, adapt this behaviour to the specific
conflict scenarios in which they work, and feel more embedded compared to when
they are in a conference setting.

7. Concluding remarks

At the time of this writing, there is a gap in the literature with respect to interpret-
ing in wars in the Middle East, despite the fact that this region witnesses numer-
ous conflicts and is one of the places where international aid is most needed. The
same is true for research into the specific roles of different types of interpreter.
This study therefore represents an initial foray into a relatively new and much-
needed area of interpreting research that presents many challenges due to the fact
that it is not always feasible to access the interpreters’ narratives or the interpret-
ers themselves for reasons of confidentiality, security and anonymity. All of these
factors make research in this field a painstaking process. Despite the associated
difficulties, we consider that interpreting in conflict zones greatly benefits from a
more profound engagement and understanding of the relevant issues, furnished in
part through the testimony of the heterogeneous group of people directly involved
in the process.

Although this paper has presented the perspective of interpreters who have
mainly worked in war-related scenarios in the Middle East, the factors that influ-
ence their role offer a stimulating starting point for further discussions on the
profession and training for interpreting in conflict scenarios. Although it is im-
portant to humanise the process of interpreting in war, in our opinion it is equally
important to professionalise it. This professionalisation requires a genuine under-
standing of the different categories of interpreter working in war-related scenarios
and the specific factors surrounding their work, which could lead to the inception
of specific training programmes.

References

Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East


Appendix 1

Section 1. Background information

1. Please specify your age
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 20–30 years old
   ○ 30–40 years old
   ○ 40–50 years old
   ○ 50–60 years old
   ○ Over 60 years old

2. Please specify your nationality

3. How many years have you been working as an interpreter?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 1–5 years
   ○ 5–10 years
   ○ 10–15 years
   ○ 15–20 years
   ○ More than 20 years
4. In which modality have you worked/do you work more often? (5 being the one you have worked or work the most and 1 the least.)
   Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consecutive with note taking</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consecutive without note taking</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sight translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chuchotage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liaison/Bilateral</td>
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<td>Bidule</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Which one?

5. What is your language combination?

6. Please specify your studies
   Please choose all that apply:
   - Degree in Translation and/or Interpreting
   - Degree in Translation and/or Interpreting plus other degree
   - Master’s degree in Translation and/or Interpreting
   - Other:

7. Please specify your occupation
   Please choose all that apply:
   (1) □ Interpreter
   (2) □ Translator
   (3) □ Lecturer
   (4) □ Retiree
   (5) □ Other:

7.1 Please specify which type of teaching you deliver
   Please choose all that apply:
   - Interpreting
   - Translation
   - Other:

8. Are you a freelance interpreter or do you work as a staff interpreter?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ◦ Freelance
   ◦ Staff
   ◦ Other
Section 2. Interpreting in conflicts. Working conditions

9. In which conflicts have you worked?

10. How many years have you worked as an interpreter in conflicts?
    Please choose only one of the following:
    ○ Less than a year
    ○ 1–2 years
    ○ 2–4 years
    ○ 4–8 years
    ○ 8–10 years
    ○ More than 10 years

11. In which modality do you most often work in conflicts? (5 being the one you have worked/work the most and 1 the least.)
    Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

11.1 Which one?

12. What is the usual duration of a mission?
    Please choose only one of the following:
    ○ Less than a week
    ○ One or more weeks
    ○ One month
    ○ Several months
    ○ One year or more

13. In which types of communicative situations have you usually interpreted in conflicts? (1 being never and 5 very frequent.)
    Please choose the appropriate response for each item:
13.1 Which one?

14. What degree of importance do you give to preparation and documentation prior to interpreting in conflicts? (1 being very low and 5 being very high.)

   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

   Why?

15. Does prior specific preparation and documentation depend on the communicative situation?

   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

15.1 Please specify which type of communicative situation

16. Do you consider that the interpreter in conflicts is a cultural mediator as well as being a linguistic mediator?

   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

16.1 Why?

17. Is the work of the interpreter assessed?

   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

17.1 Who usually evaluates the work of the interpreter? (1 being unfrequently and 5 very frequently.)
Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East

17.1.1 Please specify who

18. Does the interpreter in conflicts usually receive any type of recognition? (1 being never and 5 always.)
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

19. Do you consider the role of the interpreter in conflicts to be useful?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

19.1 Why?

20. Have you signed any confidentiality agreements when working in conflicts?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No
   ○ Depending on the communicative situation

20.1 Please specify which type of communicative situation
   Please choose all that apply:
   □ On the ground
   □ Conversations
   □ Meetings
   □ Negotiations
   □ Other:

21. Does the interpreter in conflicts usually work in a team during the conflict?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   – ○ Yes
   – ○ No
   – ○ It depends on the communicative situation

21.1 Please specify which type of communicative situation
   Please choose all that apply:
22. In which phase of the conflict have you usually worked?
Please choose all that apply:
- Before the conflict
- During the conflict
- After the conflict
- All of the above
- Other:

23. Does your role vary depending on the phase of the conflict you work in?
Please choose only one of the following:
- Yes
- No

23.1 Please specify how it varies

24. What factors would you consider as difficulties or challenges when interpreting in a conflict?

Section 3. Interpreting in conflicts. Training

25. Do you consider that the interpreter in conflicts must have specialized training?
Please choose all that apply:
- Yes, in Law
- Yes, in Economics
- Yes, in Human Rights
- Yes, in Diplomacy
- All of the above
- No
- Other:

26. Do you consider that any interpreter could work in conflicts?
Please choose only one of the following:
- Yes
- No

26.1 Why?

27. Do you consider that current training in learning centres or interpreting schools qualifies interpreters to work in conflicts?
Please choose only one of the following:
- Yes
- No

27.1 Why?
28. Do you consider that interpreting schools should add a module or teach interpreting in conflict zones?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

29. Do you consider that the interpreters who are currently working in conflicts are well prepared or qualified for that work?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

29.1 Why?

30. Does the interpreter receive protection when working in conflicts? (1 being never and 5 always.)
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

**Final questions**

31. Do you consider that the protection that the interpreter receives in conflicts is sufficient?
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

   Why?

32. Please specify the degree of acceptance of the interpreter’s services in conflicts (1 being very low and 5 very high)
   Please choose only one of the following:
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

   Why?
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